

Challenges to education in an era of uncertainty

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The RANGSIT JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES (RJAS), the most recent academic publication of Rangsit University, is being launched at a time when the world is experiencing shifts in culture, language and capital, largely due to the globalisation of everyday life. The rise of communication technology has helped to ignite the explosion of new knowledge that began in the 1950s. The resultant change has been swift and rapid and, for many, the speed of progress, especially in emerging fields like technology, communication, health care, food science, energy sources, environmental and transportation sciences has been entirely unpredictable. Academics, researchers, administrators, legislators and people in general, particularly those who have been at the top of their profession, are nowadays occasionally caught off-guard by the emergent expansion and the multitude of initiatives in a variety of fields. In this foreword, I briefly outline the challenges that universities are facing in this new era and discuss their implications to education, research and, ultimately, to the contribution that the RJAS seeks to make in these areas of development.

Only a few decades ago, the ways in which knowledge was produced allowed a small number of prominent individuals to dominate their respective fields of expertise, largely because access to information was more difficult and, as a result, it was less available across the community. The pace of change was slower, thus making progress more controllable. This traditional pattern began to break in the 1980s when the production of new knowledge and the making of discoveries accelerated at an explosive rate, outpacing the common human ability to understand, anticipate and adapt to change. Furthermore, developments in communication technology led to an unparalleled openness of information. The doors were opened for many more people to become involved in knowledge production and in the construction of alternative views of knowledge, thus challenging, at least in principle, those who had been dominating the various fields of intellectual activity.

The impact of modern-day technology is evident and we need look no further than recent

events in the Middle East and Japan to witness its effects on nations and their people in times of unrest and disaster. Because of the existence of Facebook, the people of Egypt were able to stand united in their quest for liberty and to achieve it ultimately. In a different perspective, the citizens of Japan were able to reconnect with their loved ones by posting news on their home pages. Without warning, Facebook and similar platforms have transformed the communication and interaction patterns between and among human beings. Internet statistics help us capture the rate of change involved (Bullas, 2011; Efrati, 2011). It is estimated that, every month, approximately 31 billion searches are performed on the Google search engines (Fisch, McLeod, & Bronman, 2008). Five years ago, in 2006, there were less than 3 billion (Fisch et al., 2008). Many sought-after jobs in 2011 simply did not exist ten years ago (Kiplinger staff, 2011). If this trend continues, as it seems to be, today's young people will work in jobs that do not exist currently and have not been thought of. They will use technology that has not yet been invented and will solve problems that we cannot even begin to foresee. It is estimated that in 2008 alone 4 exabytes of unique information were generated. This is more information than mankind has produced in the previous 5,000 years (Fisch et al., 2008). Further, the amount of new technical information is doubling every 2 years (Fisch et al., 2008). This means that students who begin a 4 year technical degree today will discover that half of what they learned in the first year of their studies has become outdated by the time they are in their third year (Fisch et al., 2008).

In fact, we are witnessing a fundamental shift in our society, perpetrated by technological advances. The scope and impact of that change appears to be unlike any transformations experienced heretofore. We are moving into new and uncharted territory, potentially challenged by the new generation born into a world that we created, but that we no longer know. In order to identify our own role in this new world, we need to understand the direction of this change.

Questions regarding change and its direction have also been raised by education

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experts concerned with the kinds of skills and attributes necessary for students to embark on high quality learning. Engaging in these kinds of reflections enables academics to ponder over the kinds of contributions that the academy can make to society as a whole (cf. Barrie, 2004: P. 262). These are important matters to deal with if universities are to remain relevant in the new world. As a result of these concerns, many universities across the world engage in identifying generic attributes for prospective graduates and seek to explicate those in terms of the teaching and learning processes involved in the development of these attributes across the range of university courses available. These activities illustrate that universities are in fact ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century. While it is true that universities are actually responding to the learning pressures of modern society, it is difficult to imagine what could be the alternative. There are, indeed, new challenges for education in this “Era of Uncertainty”.

As traditional forms of teaching are giving way to irresistible change, support and encouragement are needed to accelerate the efforts of universities striving for academic excellence and innovation in both teaching methods and content. With this goal in mind, research needs to address questions relevant for universities so as to enable them to maintain their role as leaders of change, innovation and education by learning from past experience and through information sharing. Our quest for answers begins and ends with education. Education, therefore, is the key to the welfare of nations and their peoples. Where there are problems, economic or social, it is through education that the best solutions are formed. Hence it is critical that all people have access to education, regardless of their nationality, religion, culture, or way of life. We are all citizens of one world.

To summarize, in order to assert the role of universities as leaders and innovators, we must open ourselves to new influences and truly embrace the new opportunities that are becoming available. We must accept the values of the new generation, even when they contradict our own habits and tastes. We must respect the new views of young people who are learning to gradually take responsibility for their future, as they mature. We must learn to perceive technology as one of mankind's greatest achievements, created to serve humans. We must understand and be skilled in new ways of communication and the corresponding benefits of faster and better-managed information. We must use technology wisely, as more information

does not necessarily translate into an increase in knowledge, far less in the capacity (wisdom) to discern. We must invest in IT wisely and learn to use it wisely. We must acknowledge that, often, teachers and staff may be technologically less skilled than their students, as they grew up in an environment where technology was used to a much lesser extent. And most of all, we need to recognise that we are not only participants in change, but also creators of ongoing change.

At the human level, an integral part of change is the growing recognition that we are all one people, despite our differences and diversity. We belong to ourselves, not to any specific country; we live together, learn together, and establish friendships and partnerships for future endeavors in an atmosphere which is conducive to fulfilling our intellectual and emotional potential. This creates the necessity for mutual cooperation and recognition and, while the goals of education around the world may be similar, the systems, processes and infrastructures will vary from country to country and from continent to continent. All cultures have positive aspects to offer, and sharing and collaboration help new “cultures” to emerge. When the uniqueness of individuals is cultivated and respected, such collaborative contexts can help foster a global vision while respecting the local conditions and values. This is often referred to as *glocalisation*, vs. *globalisation*: “Think globally and act locally”. Not all answers can be created by policy-makers and administrators. To a large extent, the shape of the new world will depend on the young people and the quality of the education that we produce.

As part of the academic world, we are greatly encouraged to see a growing awareness among educators, parents and students of the importance of educational reform and the need to encourage the younger generation to participate in change in an informed manner. We are hopeful for the future of the nations in our part of the world. They have agreed to share and work together in a union known as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Full cooperation in many areas, most particularly research, is close at hand and will come to fruition in 2015.

It is in our constant quest for new views, new perspectives and new insights that I express the hope that the RJAS will become one of the instruments by which research scientists, social observers and critics can share new knowledge as well as challenge some of the dysfunctional notions inherited from the past.

In launching this new journal, it is my fervent wish that specialists in the arts and sciences everywhere, not just members of ASEAN, will contribute research articles and commentaries on important issues for us, global citizens, as we tread the path toward a more fruitful future in this “Era of Uncertainty”. I hereby extend my best wishes to the readers, the Editorial Board, and to current and future contributors who will help make RJAS a vehicle for disseminating new knowledge and discoveries that will enhance education as a tool for the citizens of all nations to lead a happy and productive life in the 21st century.

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