CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION

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An Overview of Malaysian Institution of Higher Learning

An integral component of Malaysia's nation building is human resource development. The achievement of socio-economic objectives depends on the availability of educated and skilled labor force. Towards this end, education and training efforts are being taken and intensified not only to equip individuals with the appropriate knowledge and skills but also to produce responsible citizens with strong moral and ethical values. In addition, such efforts will help develop a competent labor force that will be essential for the attainment of Vision 2020 in making Malaysia a fully developed nation by year 2020 (Guide to Higher Education and Training, 1998).

Since its independence in 1957, Malaysia has achieved much in education where tremendous changes and development have been made. A national system has evolved from a fragmented and diversified system of schooling. There has also been a manifold increase in enrolment at all levels. Curriculum reforms and the increasing use of educational technology have also enhanced the quality of education.

Towards the end of 1995, the Malaysian Parliament passed a number of bills on education, namely the Education Bill, the National Higher Education Council Bill, the Private Institute of Higher Learning Bill, the National Accreditation Board Bill and the Universities and Universities Colleges (Amendment) Bill.

The bills introduced a new legislation to provide for the implementation of education policy to meet the needs of the rapid development of the country. The Education Bill outlines a national system of education, which provides for Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction, a national curriculum and common examinations. It provides for a varied and comprehensive education that is expected to satisfy Malaysia's needs and promote national unity through cultural, social, economic and political development.

Higher Education

Higher education provides opportunities for academic pursuit and the advancement of knowledge. It aims to provide professionals to meet manpower needs and requirements besides providing facilities for research and consultancy services. Institutes of higher education include universities, colleges and polytechnics. In addition, the number of private institutions in Malaysia that offer tertiary and professional qualifications, other diplomas and degrees is also on the increase (Guide to Higher Education and Training, 1998).

The following paragraphs will discuss the system of higher education in Malaysia in detail so that readers may have a better outlook on the education system.

Application for degree programs for the universities namely; Universiti Malaya (UM); Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM); Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM); Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM); Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM); Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) are processed through a central admission application processing office of the Ministry of Education (MOE); known as Unit Pusat Universiti (UPU). Entry application for UIA and UTM are processed by the respective universities.

The following are the basic education requirements to enter the local universities:

- Candidates must pass SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) or its equivalent with a credit in Bahasa Malaysia or its equivalent and pass 2 subjects of at least Grade E or one subject at Grade E and 2 at Grade R at STPM (Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia) and a pass in General Paper.
- Candidates must have sat for the STPM examination not less than 2 years after the SPM examination or its equivalent.

The selection of candidates is not based only on academic merit. The following factors are also taken into consideration :

- Combination of subjects chosen by candidates
- Choice of majors
- Grades of subjects
- Grades of Bahasa Malaysia, English and Mathematics at SPM
- Co-curricular activities
- Availability of places

Private Colleges and Institutions of Higher Learning

The private sector plays an increasingly important role in human resource development in Malaysia. The demand of education has resulted in the proliferation of private institutions offering various tertiary courses. The government encourages the continual expansion of private sector education as this supplements public sector efforts. This is also in line with the Government's efforts to encourage private sector participation in the economic development and to make Malaysia a center of excellence for education in the region.

Educational programs offered at post-secondary level include British GCE 'A' Level, Matriculation in Science, Law and Accountancy, as well as "Twinning" and "Split" programs. Students enrolled in the "Twinning" or "Split" program do part of the credit hour requirements locally and complete their studies in the parent universities abroad. Most of these programs are conducted in institutions linked to universities in the United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

An Overview of Reading

Reading is one of the most ancient means of bringing knowledge and culture within the reach of people (Mohrhardt, 1972). The role of reading is growing along with society's scientific-technological and cultural progress. Critically, it offers independent access to information and communication. Not to be able to read is to be marginalized and impoverished, both culturally and economically. As many have observed throughout the history of humankind: illiteracy imprisons, literacy liberates.

Any emphasis on the past, on tradition, on the idea of great men and the immortality that history brings to them, runs counter to the cult of instantaneousness which today makes so strong an appeal. Among young people in particular the conviction that "it happens and it's over " is very strong. Yet a developing curiosity about the past, fed by wide reading, is the very basis of humanistic education. Through such reading one acquires the sense of life possibilities and limitations (Ray, 1972).

Most people have heard of those undergraduates who boasted of never having entered their university library and everyone knew too many university graduates whose last reading preceded their last examination. Were they, their colleagues, and their institutions doing all their might to develop the campus atmosphere, the campus values, the curricular patterns, the study habits, and learning goals that made students from whatever background into educated men and women in whose way of life reading had a meaningful part? If not, what can be done to start remedying the situation? (Price, vi, 1959).

Reading and Critical Thinking

Publications such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and Boyer's (1987) *College : The Undergraduate Experience in America*, decried the decline in student motivation, in standardized test scores, in any interest in reading, in the ability to reason qualitatively and quantitatively, and in the capacity to think critically. *A Nation at Risk* has stated that the Commission on Excellence, for example, noted that 40 percent of seventeen-year-olds cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay; and only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps.

Surveys conducted by the National Assessment of Education Progress and the National Commission on Excellence have found that students spend most of their time acquiring factual data but do not consistently apply these data to larger concepts of their daily lives (Goodland, 1984).

Chaffee (1985) defines critical thinking as "making sense of our world by carefully examining our thinking and the thinking of others in order to clarify and improve our understanding". Reading is considered to be one of the optimum means for training the mind to think critically. A well-written literary tale unfolds from a problem and leads to the critical thinking skills of planning, decision making, reflecting and evaluating. Critical reading actively involves the participant in many levels of thinking, beginning with the anticipation, forecasting, and inquiry and continuing through the problem-solving processes (Roth, 1989).

Similarly, critical thinkers carefully analyze situations, issues and messages, checking for logical and supported arguments. They are not easily swayed by clever communicators who appeal to one's emotion nor are they influenced by messages without adequate supporting evidence or by arguments loaded with faulty reasoning (Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Sacco, 1987; MacAdam, 1995).

Educators invariably conclude that thinking strategies cannot be taught by a lecturer standing at the front of the room but must be learned by individual students (Clarke & Biddle, 1993).

When students do not actively think their way to conclusions ... they do not achieve higher-order learning. They end their schooling with a jumble of fragmentary opinions, rigidly understood procedures, and undisciplined beliefs. Their ability to mature intellectually and morally, and their capacity and motivation to learn are stunted (Paul, 1992, p. 4).

Researchers have further found that :

- Students who already know a lot find it easy to learn more.

- Students who know little have little basis for learning more.

- Students who have included errors in their learning may only confirm those errors in trying to learn new information ... Students who know little are more easily misled by the little they know. (Clarke & Biddle, 1993, p. 18).

Postman (1979) suggested that as one learns the language of a subject, one is also learning what the subject is. Hirsch (1985) concludes along with Postman, that reading and thinking are not merely inseparable but inseparable from background knowledge that is discipline related. Lazere (1992) defines a set of criteria for critical literacy based on higher order critical thought through language.

Among the abilities such literacy requires are :

- To unify and make connections in one's experience and academic studies

- To sustain an extended line of thought through propositional, thematic or symbolic development

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- To reason back and forth between the concrete and the abstract
- To be attuned to skepticism, irony, relativity of viewpoint ... ambiguity and the multiplicity of meaning in linguistics or aesthetics structures.

Language incorporated into a narrative structure, particularly as literature, appears to have a peculiar power to extend our own experience by providing us with the opportunity "to come to know men and women we would never otherwise meet, to participate in their lives, indeed to use their lives as dress rehearsal for our own". (Clarke & Biddle, 1993, p. 24). Furthermore, the very act of meaningful reading requires that readers be active "meaning-makers" rather than passive recipients of information.

Recent studies have sought to investigate formally the relationship between critical thinking for reasoning skills and the process of reading. In a study of undergraduate students' reading, writing and problem solving mechanisms, Roseberry (1989) discovered that successful college students share an important belief that writing and reading are fundamentally purposeful acts of communication. Their research illuminates the nature of problem-solving in skilled reading and writing processes that are held as goals for college students. They note that college students are faced with the problem of constructing meaning from some purpose and of activating prior knowledge to understand a written text.

Farley and Elmore (1992) examined the relationship of reading comprehension for underachieving college first year students to their critical thinking skills, vocabulary and cognitive ability. Their synthesis of current research suggests that reading is a process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction of the reader, the text, and the context of the reading situation that results

in the acquisition of knowledge, experience, or information. Reading comprehension is thought to depend upon the reader's ability to interrelate appropriately acquired knowledge with the information suggested in the text.

Researchers have reported that college students with lower verbal ability to identify individual words and facts were unable to combine the information in the text with the previously acquired information. This inability to integrate ideas was accompanied by an inability to draw logical inferences and the inability to check ideas while reading to see if the ideas contradicted one another. College students were found lacking in deductive and inductive reasoning, the ability to infer, to recognize assumptions and evaluate conclusions. Thus, reading comprehension was directly linked with a variety of cognitive or critical thinking abilities (Farley & Elmore, 1992, p.929).

According to Nuttal (1982) one of the reasons for poor reading performance and lack of interest in reading is that the readers are trapped in a vicious circle :

reads slowly

doesn't enjoy reading

doesn't read much

doesn't understand
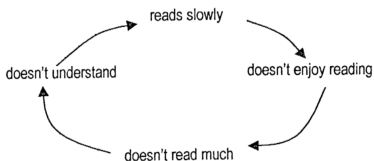
Thus, it was suggested that a reader has to be rescued from this cycle, and helped to enter the cycle of growth :
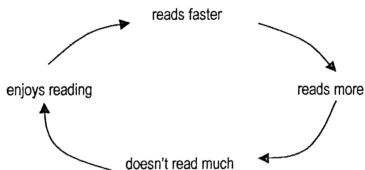
Nuttal claims that a reader can enter the cycle of growth at any one point. However, she suggested "enjoyment ", closely followed by "quantity". At the heart of her philosophy of reading is the slogan "we learn to read by reading".

Benefits of Leisure Reading

Freedman (1998) suggested that there are some fairly good reasons why an exciting novel can be preferred over a motion picture. People do not realize that a good book is much more invigorating than a movie. For example, when watching a movie, we are seeing the director's interpretation of the story. While reading a book, on the contrary, how the character or a scene is visualized is all up to the reader. The author's writing is simply the yarn for the reader's imaginary fabric. Inherently, reading stimulates the brain and develops creative thinking. Often, intricate details could not be extracted from the books into the movie because there simply is insufficient time. Freedman further suggested that reading is also a superior method for broadening one's vocabulary. Nowadays, the ability to express oneself with a larger array of words is indispensable. After all, what sounds

better, "a bit confused" or "a tad perplexed". The great thing about leisure reading is that it does not have to be classic literature to be a learning experience. A good Stephen King or Dean Koontz book does wonders for the brain.

By reading books, one get confirmations or rejections of their own ideas which make them think more critically about rights and wrongs in the society (Berglund, 1998). Thus, books can provide people with a sense of values, which can enable them gradually to develop what is perhaps the greatest of all virtues – the ability to understand rather than condemn.

Literature also opens up a whole new exciting world that may very well be a form of escapism for some readers. Our very own life can be so dull and colorless at times compared to that of the book. In this case one might say that fiction plays the part of an "alternative world" to its reader (Jackson, 1983). A world which is safe to enter into and retreat from whenever it suits the reader. As formulated by Jackson, "By trying ourselves out in different positions, cultures and worlds through our reading we can gain new understanding of, and perspectives on ourselves and our place in the world." Escapism is a very normal way of retreat in our modern society. It is also one that we definitely should indulge ourselves in.

Fiction can act very much as an active confrontation at times (Jackson, 1983). Since many literature nowadays involves controversial issues such as politics, religions, racism, abortion and so on, this is very likely to challenge one's thoughts and beliefs. The power of literature is, in this case, very substantial when it stirs up emotions and involves the reader in a special way. Many people seem to think this is a nice aperitif to the actual reading experience. The novel does not leave its reader completely empty afterwards, but instead enlightened and maybe a little wiser than

before.

Books can also be very comforting, especially at times when you doubt yourself and your beliefs. It is always nice to read about someone who is suffering the same heartaches and pains as yourself, that other people have the same kind of fears and warring emotions. Literature can therefore help one survive in a somewhat chaotic world (Chambers, 1993).

Reading is acknowledged not only as a language skill, but also as a means of educating and developing an individual and society. Yet there are many people today, both within and without the formal educational environment, who have not made progress in this valuable skill, despite the wealth of reading material, and endless efforts by teachers and researchers who are making to diagnose and treat poor performance in this area.

Moreover, "reading as a practice and art" has tended to diminish – at any rate the reading of imaginative work for the satisfaction it offers to the imagination" (Lim, 1978). One of the reasons for the decline has been attributed to the failure of educational institutions such as schools and colleges to cultivate permanent interest in students to read.

Statement of Problems

Reading Problems

The habit of leisure reading does not appear to be a prominent feature in the lives of most Malaysians. The need to encourage the habit of reading and to stimulate greater interest in printed literature has been voiced by the Education Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak. He said

that the emphasis now is not on increasing literacy, but on prompting the reading habit when asked to comment on the Malaysian public literacy survey organized by the National Library.

National Library Director-General Datin Mariam Abdul Kadir warned that if the situation was not checked, the country would not achieve the Government's goal of having a Malaysian society that was inculcated with the reading culture by the year 2020 (New Straits Times, 1998).

The multi-lingual literacy situation in Malaysia also gives rise to certain reading problems. As a result of the multi-lingual system of education at the primary level and the bilingual system of education at the secondary level, the student population is made up of those who, depending on their educational background, can read in Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese and Tamil or a combination of two or three of these four main languages. There is, therefore, the problem of selecting leisure reading materials in terms of not only of subject matter preferred but also of language preference or the readers or the availability of books in the preferred language.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gather and analyse relevant information, which will provide the necessary data for :

    a) a veritable potrayal of the leisure reading habits of students in academic institutions;

    b) confirmation and extension of current findings on students leisure reading and

    c) additionally compare the popularity of reading to other leisure activities.

In order to examine the purpose of this study, relevant data are sought to answer the following questions :

a) Do students read for pleasure and if so, what are they reading ?

b) What are the readership profiles ? What is the relationship between social background and leisure reading ?

c) What are the differences in readership profiles between male and female respondents?

d) What are the differences in readership profiles between races ?

e) How does reading as a leisure practice compare in popularity to other leisure activities ?

f) What are the motivational factors that encouraged students to read ?

g) What are the barriers towards leisure reading ?

h) What type of reading materials are most popular among the students ?

i) Where do the students source for their leisure book ?

j) What are the students opinions and values towards leisure reading ?

k) On average, how much do students spend on leisure reading materials on monthly basis?

l) What are the basic characteristics that students take into considerations before purchasing a leisure book ?

The Variables

The independent variables are as follows :

    a) Sex

    b) Race

    c) Faculty

    d) Economic Background

    e) Academic Achievement

    f) Type of Institution

The dependent variables are :

a) The average number of books read per year

b) The amount spent on pleasure reading per month

c) The types of books read for pleasure

d) The amount of time spent on reading newspaper

e) The three main characteristics students look for when purchasing a leisure book

f) The frequency that students read newspaper

g) The languages of leisure books that students borrowed / bought

Operational Definition

The following operational definition were applied in this study :

Leisure reading refers to reading outside or beyond the texts that are prescribed for classroom use. General reading of non-course materials is normally undertaken by students either to widen their general knowledge, to satisfy their curiosity on subjects of special personal interest to them or to seek relaxation and entertainment in creative literature. Many educators have advocated the use of leisure reading to develop in a student the skills and enjoyment of reading and of learning a language.

"Reading habit" for the purpose of this study, does not imply the acquired reading technique which enables an individual to attack a reading situation so as to attain maximum reading efficiency for a particular purpose such as speed reading. It refers to the quantity of reading material read or the regularity of the reading undertaken. Reading habit also refers tot he amount of different kinds of reading materials (story books / novels, magazines, reference books, comic-books and newspapers) in any languages that was read by the respondent before the collection of the data, the frequency of reading and time spent on reading in an average month.

Unless otherwise stated, reading habits refer to reading done not only in the varsity / college but also when at home during the holidays.

"Reading Interests" refers to the kind of subject matter read.

"Language Preference" implies the students' consistent preference for materials printed in a particular language. The notion of "preference" is to be derived from the students' answers on how regularly they choose to read material in their preferred language or languages.

"Reading preference" in this context is studied from the point of view of selective awareness of a consistent preference for a particular type of reading matter in books or periodicals and for particular items of information in newspapers.

"Motivation" is the phenomena involved in the operation of incentive or drives (Drver, 1964). It is the factor that leads a reader to select his reading material from a range of publications that could presumably satisfy his purpose. Motivation falls into such categories as recommendation from friends, self-interest, etc.

Significance of Study

This study aims to gather and analyse relevant data which will provide the necessary information so that a description of the reading activity of students in higher learning institutions can be obtained and inferences on the readership between variables concerning the habit of reading can be made.

The identification of the problems resulting from the statistical analysis of the data would then form a basis for proposing a program to promote wider reading among the students and more effective utilization of the library resources. Educationists have long recognised that leisure reading habits should be established in academic institutions, that the development and direction of taste had to

be sensitively fostered and that adequate library facilities were necessary for sustaining reading inclinations if the goal of a literate, well-informed society was to be achieved. The findings could also serve as a guide in planning and formulating policies on reading guidance and collection development in Malaysian universities and colleges. Decision and policy makers should then have a better understanding of the problems faced by the students and what needs to be resolved in order to promote better reading culture among students in academic institutions.

Findings reported here would also help to provide reliable information of existing patterns and offer insights into how conditions could be further improved. It can also be used as action plans for qualitative improvement of leisure reading materials.

Limitations of the Study

This study is an exploratory study and not a complete investigation of the reading habits and interests of subjects. Other variables such as attitude to the second language (English), urban against rural background and personality factors have not been included. There was also no attempt to find out if there has been change in reading habits and interests from secondary school to college.

The above were omitted due to insufficient time and resources to develop suitable measuring instruments to measure all the relevant variables.