

Original Paper

A Milestone for Liberal Arts Education in Indonesia

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Abstract

This article seeks to draw attention to a milestone in the development of Indonesian higher education, and to offer some evaluation of its significance. This milestone is the government's new strategy regarding General Education in higher education institutions, which is laid out in an Indonesian-language book published by the department of education, and is presently being enacted across a range of higher education institutions.

The approach taken is to offer a critical summary of the book, and then to focus on one instance of the enactment of its principles, as evidenced in two recent studies regarding the perspectives of stakeholders at an Indonesian university.

In the light of this, it is suggested that the continued enactment of General Education in Indonesia will likely be accompanied by a painstaking negotiation between utilitarian and non-utilitarian impulses.

This contributes to a growing picture of the implementation of liberal arts-style education in Asian settings.

Keywords

Indonesia, higher education, liberal arts, general education

1. Introduction

In a 2019 speech to mark Indonesia's Independence Day on August 17, the Indonesian minister for education, Mohamed Nasir, commented:

We are aware that for the progress of Indonesian industry, it is not enough just to deal with infrastructure; this must be supported by improving the quality of human resources, and improving the quality of human resources can be achieved by improving education with technological advances in line with industry 4.0. (Nasir, 2019, p. 3; translated)

The minister urged that universities and other organisations must work together so that Indonesia can be marked by innovation and creativity in its workplaces. This emphasis on national development

through education has been very important for the present government, and President Joko Widodo himself has made similar comments on the importance of higher education for the nation's future (KRTPT, 2018, p. 79). In late 2018, the government's Department of Research Technology and Higher Education published a book as part of an initiative to revitalise and redirect higher education in the country (KRTPT, 2018). The book argues that fresh priority must be given to core educational content and the development of national cultural values, for the sake of preparing Indonesia for Industry 4.0. The book is titled (in translation), *General Education: Preparing the People of Indonesia for the Era of Industrial Revolution 4.0*.

The English phrase "General Education" is used throughout this Indonesian-language book, in order to encapsulate the government's sense of a key need for the Indonesian higher education system at this moment: an improved core-educational component that is mandatory for all bachelor-level degrees. This emphasis on the need for improved General Education is repeatedly said to be inspired by "liberal arts education" (KRTPT, 2018, x, p. 33, p. 47), and to require the reworking of Indonesian higher education's previously existing mandatory core component (MKDU).

This raises several questions: What has happened to bring Indonesian education to this moment? How is this fresh emphasis on General Education being enacted in higher education institutions? How does this relate and compare to liberal arts education elsewhere in Asia and the rest of the world?

2. Method

2.1 Document Analysis and Case Study

In this paper, we seek to propose answers to these questions by providing analysis of the book in question (heretofore unavailable to an English language audience); considering recent qualitative and quantitative studies relating to the enactment of General Education/liberal arts at an Indonesian university; and relating these issues to broader literature on education in Asia.

2.2 The Case Studies

In particular, we draw here upon two different studies. The first was reported on in a 2017 article (Malcolm, 2017), and considered the perspectives of lecturers; the second is a 2019-2020 study regarding the perspectives of students, which is reported on here for the first time. The former study involved face-to-face interviews with all lecturers in the faculty. The latter study involved face-to-face interviews with about thirty students, supplemented by surveys conducted with about 1,000 senior students who finished the liberal arts requirements of their curriculum immediately prior to the global pandemic.

3. Result

3.1 Document Analysis

3.1.1 A Vision for Indonesian Higher Education

As its subtitle suggests, the book envisages higher education as a means by which Indonesia can prepare human resources for Industry 4.0, and so develop its presence in a global economy. In this era, it is said in the prologue, it is no longer good enough for graduates to be proficient at rote memorisation and practical skills; they need to develop creative thinking, deep understanding, and transferable skills, with a common vision for the betterment of the country. The overall approach is thus openly utilitarian: education should be useful for creating human resources that will aid the Indonesian economy.

3.1.2 Challenges for Indonesian Higher Education

Changes in education, it is affirmed, are linked with other changes in society. For example, Dutch-influenced education institutions were formed during the period of colonisation, and tightly-controlled militaristic education proceeded from the period of Japanese occupation in the twentieth century. In these and subsequent periods, educational change has been at the forefront of societal change, and it is for this reason that the government now hopes to see positive changes in Indonesian society spearheaded through the development of higher education. Whereas in the past, the disruptions that prompted new forms of education included colonialism and foreign occupation, now Indonesia faces an era of globalisation and technological advancement, with significant international competition.

In this context, the book urges, Indonesian education must form students who can think creatively, engage in dialogue, and make the most of technological advances. Lecturers must therefore rise to a higher professional level, by collaborating with foreign institutions and participating in mentoring programs. They need to develop competencies that are appropriate for Industry 4.0, so that they can equip students for this new era.

The book's determined attention to industry and the national economy extends to the expectation that all lecturers will develop "competence for technological commercialization" (KRTPT, 2018, p. 15; the English phrase is used), enabling students to innovate and bring their learning to commercial fruition. Although it is not explained how this will apply in different study programs, one may wonder whether such competence is equally relevant for all higher education subjects. Will the enactment of new policies associated with this book favour the development of certain study programs and subjects at the expense of less technological or commercially-applicable subjects such as philosophy or literature? The book states, "The integration of technological sophistication and the internet with industry encapsulates the world of work in the era of the industrial revolution 4.0" (KRTPT, 2018, p. 20; translated).

There is, perhaps, a tension here: it is recognised that workplaces of the twenty-first century require workers who are creative, critical thinkers; and yet one wonders whether the subjects in which students might be most free to develop creativity and curiosity may be at risk because of their lack of immediate technological and industrial application.

3.1.3 General Education as a Way Forward

Notwithstanding the hesitation above, it is clear that the book advocates the development of broader and more rigorous General Education than is currently the case in Indonesian higher education, with a view to developing a thoughtful, creative, adaptable workforce. Having established the context and relevant challenges, the book goes on to provide a broad definition of General Education, from the perspective of the Indonesian government:

General Education is education in a general form, which must be followed by all students, and includes the moral Pancasila education program that functions for the development of good citizens. (KRTPT, 2018, p. 28; translated)

It is striking that while the definition here says nothing about critical thinking, cross-disciplinary content, or industry application, it does draw attention to moral citizenship. This links the new incarnation of General Education strongly with its predecessor, MKDU (*Mata Kuliah Dasar Umum*, “general basic courses”), which required students to take courses in language, religion, civics, and Pancasila (the national ideology arising from the establishment of Indonesian independence in 1945). The new incarnation continues to require these courses, but seeks to give greater attention to the need for the Indonesian economy to thrive in Industry 4.0, by emphasising transferable skills and entrepreneurship.

It seems, then, that while the mandatory component of Indonesian higher education early in the independent nation’s history focused on uniting a culturally diverse country by providing common vision and values, the government now regards it as necessary to expand this mandatory component, with a view to national economic development.

However, although the description so far may give the impression of a mandatory educational supplement that is rigidly set by the government, it is important to note that the government expects that each higher education institution will enact the values of General Education in a way that is fitting for its own institutional character. Further, these values may be applied across curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities. So the enactment of General Education in one institution might look quite different to its enactment in another institution. This will be seen in the next section. (Note that for the sake of being concise, I am giving no comment on those intervening sections of the book that give more detailed attention to the history of Indonesian education, and a philosophical account of General Education)

3.1.4 Enactment of General Education in Higher Education Institutions

A large portion of the book is given to describing higher education institutions that are already attempting to enact the values of General Education, in accordance with their own particular institutional character. A dozen institutions are described, with the purpose that they might inspire other Indonesian education institutions to find their own embodiment of the values of General Education.

For example, it is pointed out that the University of Indonesia has for ten years been running an integrated mandatory program for all first year students, which covers the key values of General

Education. The Institut Pertanian Bogor has been running its General Competency Education Program since 2013, featuring four pillars: academics and worldview; passions and talents; social sensitivity; and spiritual awareness. At Universitas Negeri Surabaya, General Education is fitted with the specific character of the institution by using the motto “Growing with Character.” The particular values of faith, intelligence, independence, honesty, care, and resilience are emphasised.

Numerous other institutions are described, including Muslim, Catholic, and non-religious universities. The book emphasises how each institution fits General Education into its own vision and mission, resulting in a tailored approach that holds to the government’s vision for Indonesian higher education, while also expressing the institution’s own distinctive values. The theme of preparing human resources for Indonesia’s participation in Industry 4.0 is much less prominent here (appearing twice in the context of twelve case studies, p. 79, p. 99). The descriptions of the enactments repeatedly highlight topics such as values education, social and inter-cultural competence, critical thinking, and soft skills, mostly without specifying how these relate to the national economy or Industry 4.0.

3.1.5 Questions Arising

It will be useful at this point to crystallise a key question raised by the analysis above: How does the government’s utilitarian vision of education (as preparing human resources for Industry 4.0) fit with the views and practices of various stakeholders, such as institutional administrators, lecturers, and students? Regarding administrators, one might ask: How is the government’s vision actually being harmonised with individual institutional visions? (This is especially relevant for the many religious higher education institutions in Indonesia, for which a commitment to ideology and character might sometimes be at odds with commercial utility) Regarding lecturers, one might ask: Do they perceive higher education – and specifically General Education—in utilitarian terms? If so, how does this affect their teaching and research? Regarding students, one might ask: Do they perceive a link between their mandatory General Education and their employability in the era of Industry 4.0? Does this perception impact their educational choices?

We seek in the following section to engage briefly with empirical research that has been undertaken recently, regarding perspectives of stakeholders on the enactment of General Education at one Indonesian higher education institution. Because of the parameters of the studies under consideration, attention will be limited to two varieties of stakeholder: lecturers and students.

3.2 Case Study

3.2.1 Perspectives of Lecturers and Students on an Enactment of General Education

The higher education institution in question will be kept anonymous (“University X”), in accordance with the studies being drawn upon (further which see below). It is a Christian university in Indonesia, with a Faculty of Liberal Arts consisting of departments of Philosophy, Theology and Religion, and Language and Life Skills. For a decade, this faculty has been providing both the core educational courses mandated by the government, and several other core educational courses that arise from the university’s own distinctive vision. In all, it provides mandatory courses in religion, civics, Pancasila,

language, critical thinking, academic skills, and health, as well as elective courses in natural science, social science, literature, and aesthetics. Two features make this university's enactment of General Education especially distinctive. First, it uses the label "liberal arts" for its core curricular material. While this is not unheard of elsewhere in Indonesia, it is unusual (Alwasilah & Puncochar, 2016). Second, the weight given to the religious component of the mandatory curriculum is very substantial. While the government only requires one two-credit-point course to be devoted to religion, University X requires Christian students (the majority of their intake) to take four double-size courses in religion, adding up to sixteen credit points (over half of their liberal arts curriculum). Non-Christian students take an equivalent number of courses in world religions and philosophy.

The substantial weighting given to mandatory religious courses reflects the institution's particular vision: it seeks to provide distinctively Christian education, with the goal of producing graduates for whom faith and academia are integrated. The Faculty of Liberal Arts is regarded as central to the accomplishment of this vision. While this raises the interesting question of how such a distinctive vision might be integrated with the government's vision for General Education as preparing human resources for Industry 4.0, the empirical data is insufficient to explore that question at this time. The available empirical data relates to the perspectives of lecturers and students on the liberal arts component of the university's education.

3.2.2 Perspectives of Lecturers

One question identified above as arising from the analysis of the government's book was: Do lecturers at institutions in which General Education is practised perceive higher education—and specifically General Education—in utilitarian terms? That is, do lecturers share the government's perspective that General Education exists especially to equip Indonesia with human resources for Industry 4.0? The study reported on in the 2017 article would suggest an interesting answer for lecturers at University X. In that article it was found that the liberal arts curriculum was conceptualised by many lecturers in religious terms. For some, liberal arts education was thought to be "education that grounds students in a spirituality marked by a Christian worldview" (2017, p. 39). For many others, liberal arts seemed to be defined as "education that promotes the integrity of Christian faith and secular vocation" (2017, p. 39). This study showed that some lecturers appeared to express a resonance with motivations for liberal arts education that were "epistemological" (promoting interdisciplinary knowledge, 2017, p. 23, p. 30), while many were said to express a resonance with motivations for liberal arts education that were "social-moral" (promoting the development of character, 2017, p. 23, p. 33, p. 35). But none were said to display resonance with an "economic" motivation for liberal arts education (promoting the employability of graduates, 2017, p. 23).

The topic of preparation of human resources for the flourishing of Indonesia in the era of Industry 4.0 was not discussed directly in that study. But the lecturers' own perspectives on their enactment of liberal arts education seem rather distant from the government's overarching utilitarian vision for General Education. Of course, social-moral motivations are not absent from the government's vision;

but its consistent framing of the value of General Education in economic terms finds little echo in the 2017 study of University X lecturers.

3.2.3 Perspectives of Students

Another question identified above as arising from the analysis of the government's book was: Do students perceive a link between their mandatory General Education and their employability in the era of Industry 4.0? Here, the 2019-2020 study noted previously is relevant. This study, conducted by the present authors, involved all students in their final semester of liberal arts, immediately prior to the onset of the global pandemic, which resulted in off-campus study at the university.

In one section of the survey component of this study, respondents were asked to rank their agreement with four statements about liberal arts education. These statements represented the view that liberal arts primarily aims to develop broad knowledge; the view that liberal arts primarily aims to develop moral character; the view that liberal arts primarily aims to develop a religious worldview; and the view that liberal arts primarily aims to improve employability and aid the national economy. The statement expressing this last view, regarding employability and the national economy, was overwhelmingly regarded as least true by students (being selected in last place by over 65% of respondents). In other questions of the large-scale survey, respondents likewise showed less confidence in the ability of their liberal arts educational component to advantage employability or to aid the national economy than to achieve any other claimed benefit.

In the face-to-face interview component of this study, students were asked about how they would justify the liberal arts component of their transcript to a potential employer. Many students did in fact point out the benefits of having studied ethics, critical thinking, or other subjects. As an example, one student commented:

I think(the liberal arts component of my studies is) very important for my psychology degree, because it requires more than just learning the material, but integrity of character. It's more than just a job. We need to have integrity, the right lifestyle, the right worldview, in order to be a good psychologist.

Another student, when asked directly if the liberal arts portion of their degree was good for employability, answered:

Yes, because critical thinking makes us think more about the facts and new knowledge, and I think we learn every day, even when we are workers, and this helps.

It seems there was more positivity in the face-to-face interviews than in the survey results. Perhaps this suggests that while students do not immediately think of the General Education portion of their degree as being relevant to employability or the national economy, they are able to find relevant connections when invited to do so.

3.2.4 Perspectives of Lecturers and Students at University X

The studies noted above seem to indicate that neither General Education lecturers nor students at University X readily associate the mandatory liberal arts component of undergraduate degrees with the utilitarian goal of preparation for Industry 4.0. This is not to say, of course, that liberal arts at

University X fails to prepare students for Industry 4.0. It is important to recognise that the studies under consideration relate to the perspectives of the stakeholders, and these perspectives may or may not be accurate. Nevertheless, perspectives of stakeholders are important, both because they have some impacts on enactment itself (Vidovich & O'Donoghue, 2004), and because they will presumably affect other issues such as institution selection and course satisfaction. It should also be of interest to the government that their own vision for General Education does not quite match the perspectives of certain relevant stakeholders, at least in this case study.

4. Discussion

4.1 Indonesian General Education and Asian Liberal Arts

So far in this article, we have attempted to provide an orientation to an important publication about General Education by the Indonesian department for education, and we have discussed how the perspectives of certain stakeholders seem to diverge from the government's utilitarian vision for General Education. It remains to consider the significance of this discussion for the scholarly conversation regarding education more broadly in Asia and elsewhere.

The remarkable recent development of liberal arts education in Asia has received increasing interest in scholarship. With new colleges and departments springing up in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, India, and other locations, there have been numerous attempts to make sense of this development across Asia, and to compare it with the US and Europe (Kirby & Van der Wende, 2016; Marber & Arya, 2017; Rajakumar, 2018; Nishimura & Sasao, 2019). The present article contributes to this emerging picture of Asian liberal arts by introducing a distinctively renewed instantiation of Asian liberal arts: Indonesian General Education.

Like numerous other instantiations of liberal arts in Asia, this amounts to supplementary core education, for the sake of national unity and economic development. For example, the capacity of a liberal arts style education to aid the national economy has been a sensitive issue in Chinese (Wen, 2016) and other East Asian (Marginson, 2011) applications of this approach. The supplementary approach to liberal arts (that is, having a portion of a specialised bachelor degree devoted to liberal arts or general education) has been adopted in institutions such as National Taiwan University (Huang, 2016). Indeed, as Yonezawa and Nishimura point out, "all of the universities in Hong Kong and Taiwan... have added a general education... component to their existing three-year bachelor programs" (2016, p. 126).

But of course, not all liberal arts education initiatives in Asia follow this pattern of supplementary education and utilitarian motivations. Some institutions, such as Yale-NUS in Singapore, Fulbright University in Vietnam, and International Christian University in Japan, offer American-style full degrees in liberal arts, and articulate decidedly non-utilitarian motivations. Given the developments outlined in this article (particularly, the strong utilitarian push from the government), it seems to us increasingly unlikely that this model will flourish in Indonesia.

However, this is not to say that Indonesian stakeholders share the government's perspective that

supplementary General Education primarily serves to equip Indonesia with human resources for Industry 4.0. In the case study considered in this article, neither lecturers nor students appear to be especially drawn to such a characterization of General Education. Indeed, with a great many religious higher education institutions in Indonesia, for which non-utilitarian matters of ideology and character are non-negotiably central, it would seem appropriate to expect that the continued enactment of General Education may involve some ambiguity, tension, and contestation. Is it possible to pursue, to use the example of the case study examined earlier, education that is both “Christ-centred” and economically utilitarian? Perhaps it is; but not without conscientious negotiation and nuanced articulation.

Given the latter section of the education department’s book, in which broad and divergent approaches to the enactment of General Education are affirmed, it would seem that the government is content with this scenario: there is room for different institutions to adopt General Education in different ways. Perhaps this identification of contentment with divergent enactments of mandatory core education is the key contribution of the present article to the growing scholarly picture of Asian liberal arts: The future development of liberal arts style education in Indonesia, it seems, will feature the expansion of supplementary General Education, the varied enactment of which will be accompanied by an ongoing negotiation between utilitarian and non-utilitarian impulses.

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