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sociology  
education in  
singapore : its  
development,  
problems and  
prospects

john clammer

THE REGIONAL INSTITUTE OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
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# **Sociology Education in Singapore: Its Development, Problems and Prospects**

**John Clammer**

REGIONAL INSTITUTE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT  
SINGAPORE

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*The author is responsible for the choice and presentation of the facts contained in this publication and for the opinions expressed which are not necessarily those of RIHED and do not commit the Institute.*

## Preface

The sharing of knowledge about what is going on in another's university or college departments can play an important part in academic developments in the South-east Asian region. Such sharing of information makes available the data for comparative studies between countries, curricula and institutions, and it allows professional practitioners from within the region to have a better insight into the problems, possibilities and resources that exist within the region. The present paper is an attempt to survey the development and structure of sociology education in the Republic of Singapore with these objectives in mind.

The experience of Singapore in this respect is interesting and revealing. Sociology exists as a subject taught in the tertiary institutions, as one widely practised in an applied sense in government and statutory bodies in the Republic, and as a subject for active research, both among local and foreign scholars. The complex and changing nature of Singapore's social structure is no doubt largely responsible for this widespread interest in sociology, together with its perceived uses in social engineering in the highly planned Singapore environment. The present paper then examines the history and content of sociology education in Singapore against this background. The views expressed in the paper are those of the author: this is not an official paper of any of the institutions involved in sociology education in Singapore although as far as possible it has attempted to fairly portray their objectives and philosophies.

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February 1984

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# 1

## The History of Sociology Education In Singapore

The history and development of sociology education in the Republic of Singapore must be seen in the context of the development of higher education in the country, and specifically in the context of the evolution of the university system, since sociology in Singapore has always in its brief history been a subject taught systematically only at the tertiary level. We may begin then with a survey of this historical development, focussing on the three university level institutions that have so far existed in the Republic which have taught sociology subjects — the University of Singapore, Nanyang University and the National University of Singapore. The remaining institution — the Nanyang Technological Institute — which is in the process of development — as yet only caters for engineering subjects.

### THE UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

The origins of the University of Singapore can be traced directly back to two earlier institutions that preceded it — King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College. The former began in 1905 as the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Government Medical School, and in 1912 changed its name to the King Edward VII Medical School before adopting its collegiate title in 1921. Raffles College, founded in 1929, was largely funded by public subscriptions and had two faculties: Arts and Science. In October 1949 as a result of the Commission of Enquiry into university education chaired by Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders, the two colleges were merged into the University of Malaya.

In 1959 the university was formally divided into two branches — the University of Malaya in Singapore and the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, each one being largely autonomous, but under a common Vice-Chancellor and Central Council; each section had its own Principal, divisional Council

and divisional Senate. Medicine was taught at the Singapore branch, Engineering at the Kuala Lumpur branch, Arts and Sciences were duplicated except for Malay Studies, Geology and Indian Studies which were only available in Kuala Lumpur. Philosophy, Chinese and Social Studies were only available in Singapore.

On 1 January 1962, the two institutions were entirely separated and the Singapore division became the University of Singapore. In subsequent years the University grew rapidly, acquiring the Departments of Engineering, Architecture, Accountancy and Malay Studies as well as expanding and rationalising the original complement of departments. By 1980 when the University of Singapore merged with Nanyang University to become the National University of Singapore it had seven faculties and a total of approximately seven thousand students.

Social science teaching in Singapore began with the inclusion of economics courses at Raffles College, and these courses were eventually absorbed into the University of Malaya and subsequently into the University of Singapore. A Department of Political Science was established in 1958 and the Department of Sociology in 1965. Political Science, Economics and Sociology originally constituted a separate faculty of Social Sciences (established in 1966), but this merged with Arts to form a combined Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 1969. The first students were admitted to sociology courses in 1966, and in 1967 social work began as a separate department. Prior to these dates some sociological teaching had been available, one course on social organisation was being taught as a subsidiary (now called "minor") subject; and since 1952 a professional qualification for social work has been provided by the University — the Diploma in Social Studies. This diploma for social workers was deemed necessary in order to provide a trained cadre of people with skills in Social Administration until a degree course was available in the subject. The syllabus for the diploma contained a substantial amount of sociological material and the course required the additional writing of a very substantial dissertation, the subjects of which were more often than not sociological in nature.

**Table 1.1**  
**Student Enrolment 1971-1979 Department of Sociology (US)**

	1971/ 1972	1972/ 1973	1973/ 1974	1974/ 1975	1975/ 1976	1976/ 1977	1977/ 1978	1978/ 1979	1979/ 1980
1st Year	138	114	147	172	205	259	237	290	290
2nd Year	141	106	94	130	150	172	261	216	266
3rd Year	144	128	97	94	137	152	170	230	201
Honours Year	—	26	13	15	18	27	19	26	22
Postgraduate	9	10	18	10	12	12	7	7	7
Total	432	384	369	421	522	622	694	769	786

Source: Internal Statistics, Departmental Records. Singapore: University of Singapore (US), Department of Sociology, 1980.

#### NANYANG UNIVERSITY

During the colonial period in Singapore, one of the main educational problems was the lack of official provision for Chinese medium education, English naturally being the favoured language of the British administration. Private provision had always been made for Chinese primary and secondary schooling, but tertiary education for Chinese medium students was absent from Singapore, and indeed from the whole of Malaya of which Singapore was then a part. Serious proposals for a Chinese medium university began to surface in the early 1950's. In 1952 a Nanyang University General Committee was convened which set about publicising and popularising the proposal and raising funds. The distinguished writer and scholar Lin Yutang, was appointed the first Chancellor and in 1956 the new university began its teaching activities on its magnificent site in Jurong on the western part of Singapore island. In its origins, the university was thus a wholly private institution, and its original funding came entirely from the Chinese Community. In April 1958, the government set up a commission of enquiry into the standards of Nanyang University, with the result that in December of the same year it became a public institution, although even then government support in a financial form was very slowly forthcoming. Discrimination against graduates of Nanyang University was practised from the earliest days when it came to recruitment of posts in the public sector, and this legacy continued in a modified form right up to the time when Nanyang University merged with the University of Singapore in 1980, and indeed one of the reasons offered for the merger was the lack of employment opportunities for Nanyang graduates.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these problems, and others of a complex political and cultural nature which we cannot enter into here, Nanyang University developed a wide range of academic offerings in the fields of natural science, mathematics, commerce

and the arts and social sciences, the latter including Chinese language and literature, history, geography, government and public administration, a variety of modern European and Asian languages, including rarely taught ones such as Tagalog or more common ones such as French, English, Japanese and Malay and Indonesian, Mass Communications (a unique course in Singapore) and modern Asian studies, both East and Southeast Asian. Despite the backwardness of the local authorities in giving full credit to the standing of Nanyang University degrees, these same degrees were widely recognised abroad, and in some fields, for example Chinese language and mathematics, the University achieved a high degree of international eminence. In the 1960s and early 1970s, one frequently encountered Nanyang University graduates in foreign universities pursuing advanced degrees while absurdly, the same students could not gain such recognition at home.

Sociology then appeared at Nanyang University as a part of the Department of Government and Public Administration. It never achieved the status of a full department in its own right, but comprised a "programme" under the auspices of the bigger and somewhat umbrella -- like government department, which in fact sheltered all the social science disciplines, except for Geography and a few stray courses which came under the History Department and the Southeast Asian Studies programme. The Government and Public Administration Department, along with those offering Social Science options, was itself part of the College of Arts, the Nanyang University equivalent of the Arts and Social Sciences Faculty at the University of Singapore. Within the department, Sociology was taught both as a general introductory course for students taking government courses, and as a specific part of the major options within the Government Department — the "Applied Behavioural Science" option. Since the Government Department was so diverse in its interests, there were within it certain "streams" — politics, international relations, financial administration, public and social administration, elements of law and the "Behavioural Sciences", in this context meaning Sociology and Psychology. In practice students thus took thematic and disciplinary options rather than the whole range of courses offered.

The "Applied Behavioural Science" option or what became known as the Sociology and Psychology programme, offered a fairly systematic and sequential range of units at both the general degree (or what was referred to at Nanyang University as the "Pass Degree") and at the Honours level. The Sociology and Psychology programme became an effectively independent teaching unit in 1976, only shortly before the beginning of merger with University of Singapore in 1978 when the "Joint Campus" scheme was started, which will be examined more fully below. (The actual merger took place in 1980). The sequence of courses in 1975, a fairly typical year when the options were well established was as follows.

**First Year:** Introduction to Sociology  
Introduction to Anthropology

(Each course running through a whole academic year of study)

**Second Year:** Cultural Anthropology  
Social Psychology  
Social Research and Statistical Methods  
Industrial Sociology

(Each course lasting a term, or half-year, the student taking this option being required to do three of these units)

**Third Year:** Business Psychology  
Race Relations  
Urban Social Problems  
Psychological Testing

(Also term courses as in the Second Year)

**Honours:** Topics on Social Thought  
Theories on Modernisation  
Directed Research (Dissertation)

Source: Nanyang University Calendar. Singapore: Nanyang University, 1975.

In addition of course, students following this option also took other courses from the department in order to accumulate sufficient units for graduation, the others being from Politics, Social Administration, or as preference dictated.

The courses offered in the Sociology and Psychology Programmes were not, however, the only ones available in Sociology and Anthropology at Nanyang University. In the Department of History, two minor or subsidiary options were available — “Introduction to Anthropology” in the first year, and “Ethnography of Southeast Asia” in the second year. The other programme offering such courses was the *Southeast Asian Studies Programme* which, among other courses in language, literature and history, also offered two first year level courses (each of a term’s duration) in “Anthropology and Ecology of Southeast Asia” and “Man and the Environment in Southeast Asia” and a third year level course of a full academic year’s duration in “Social Structure and Social Problems in Southeast Asia”. The complete range of Sociology/Anthropology options offered by Nanyang University, while smaller than that offered at the University of Singapore, was by no means insignificant although Sociology teaching suffered from never becoming a full department, but

always remained simply as a part of a much larger and rather fragmentary programme.

The concluding part of the story relates to the merger of the two universities. The merger itself (July 1980) was preceded by two years of what was known as the "Joint Campus" scheme. Under this arrangement, students from Nanyang University attended classes at the University of Singapore campus and followed courses designed and run by the University of Singapore staff. A few members of the Nanyang University staff participated in this scheme by travelling to the University of Singapore campus and taking classes (usually only tutorials) there. Others left Nanyang University altogether, took the opportunity to upgrade their qualification or spent the time reading or writing, frequently in a somewhat demoralised state, since many saw the Joint Campus arrangement as the first move in an attempt by the government to close the Nanyang University and some could not participate in the Joint Campus scheme, since the language of instruction was English while most Nanyang University staff were Chinese speaking. In fact the staff of the Sociology and Psychology programme both gained and lost by the merger. The sociologists gained incorporation into a fully fledged and internationally well recognised main-stream Sociology Department, however, Psychology was abandoned altogether. The psychologists on the staff left university life since no role was available at the new National University; two sociologists were absorbed into the Sociology Department of the National University of Singapore (NUS), one who associated with the Mass Communication programme was phased out, and one primarily Mandarin speaking staff member resigned from the new NUS to take on a university post in Taiwan. The experiment in sociological education at Nanyang University thus never came fully into fruition. One can only speculate what might have happened if it had. Some are of the opinion that in fact the merger was a good thing, as the Sociology programme would otherwise have continued as merely part of a bigger department and as a poor relation of the Sociology Department at the University of Singapore. Others feel that had it been given the resources to develop its potential, a strong Chinese language or bilingual department could have emerged and made its own valuable contribution by wedding the Chinese and Western traditions. One can only guess, although certainly many lament the passing of the alternative tertiary institution in Singapore which had a rich history of its own.

#### THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE (NUS)

The National University of Singapore (NUS) came into existence in July 1980 with the formal merger of the University of Singapore with Nanyang University. The two years preceding the merger when the "Joint Campus" scheme was in operation meant that for teaching purposes, the two universities were already functioning largely as a single unit. Although during that period

there was no officially announced scheme for merger, many staff members in both universities correctly anticipated what was to happen. In October 1979 Sir Frederick Dainton from the United Kingdom visited Singapore for two days, and as a result of what many critics saw as being this incredibly brief period of time (during which the majority of teaching staff were not consulted at all), he submitted an equally brief report which became the official basis for the merger. Much verbal criticism (in the absence of any other more institutional channels) was directed at the report itself, the process which led to its writing, the government's apparent use of it to justify what was universally interpreted as a decision that it had already made, and the action of introducing a foreigner totally unacquainted with Singapore, the needs or aspirations of its scholarly community (who was not consulted) or with the complex history and politico-cultural basis of Singapore's still young higher educational system, to pronounce on just what those needs were.

Regardless of such criticisms, the report was adopted and the merger took place. Again, given the independent history and the association in the minds of many of the English educated political leadership of Nanyang University with "Chinese Chauvinism", the move was interpreted locally as not a real merger, but the closing of Nanyang University, and the absorption of its resources into the University of Singapore. The new initials — NUS — was officially announced as the incorporating of the initials of University of Singapore (US) with that of Nanyang University (NU), though many viewed it as a symbolic gesture to disguise the reality of what was actually happening, as was the decision to name the soon to be founded technological university, the Nanyang Technological Institute.

The history and political implications of the decision we must, however, leave to the historians and political analysts to unravel. We will instead briefly consider its consequences on our subject matter. The impact of the merger on sociological education has actually been very small. Two members of the Nanyang University's Sociology Programme staff were incorporated into the existing University of Singapore's Department, which itself continued otherwise entirely unchanged, both in its structure, staff composition and in its syllabus, the nature of which we will go on to examine in close detail.

#### Footnote

1. On this theme, see the report by Sir F. D. Dainton, *Report on University Education in Singapore*, which was the basis of the government's decision to merge the two universities, and the article by Pang Eng Fong and David Clark, "Returns to Schooling and Training in Singapore", *Malayan Economic Review*, 15, No. 2, 1970, which showed quite clearly the lower incomes and job expectations of Nanyang University graduates compared with University of Singapore graduates. On the general history of education in Singapore, and the political context in which Nanyang University appeared, see H.E. Wilson's, *Social Engineering in Singapore: Educational Policies and Social Change 1819-1972*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1978. On Nanyang University specifically see Andrew Lind, *Nanyang Perspective: Chinese Students in Multiracial Singapore*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1974.

## 2

# Objectives and Restraints

The historical circumstances of the development of sociology education in Singapore have exercised a considerable influence over the content of curricula and the representation of the subject in the various tertiary and post-secondary educational institutions in the Republic. This section will briefly review some of these influences as they bear on the objectives of sociological education and the restraints under which the subject inevitably labours. Some of these restraints are institutional, some intellectual and others political.

At the present time sociology is taught in one form or another at the National University of Singapore (NUS), the Institute of Education (IE), the Regional Language Centre (RELC), and in a very minor way at the private Trinity Theological College. Active research is located mostly at the NUS, but also in non-teaching institutions — the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), the Regional Institute for Higher Education and Development (RIHED), and in a variety of government bodies, the most conspicuous of which is the Housing and Development Board (HDB) which has a full-time sociological research section, unlike other bodies which carry out such research on an *ad hoc* basis. There is a feedback between the teaching and research organisations in terms of data sharing, professional contacts, and career opportunities for local sociology graduates, so their effects on sociological education is by no means negligible. However, of all these institutions only the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore provides a full curriculum leading to a degree in the subject. The others provide isolated service courses or individual courses which are merely a part of a wider curriculum or professional training which is not chiefly sociological in nature. The actual content of these offerings will be considered in detail in the next section.

However, the point to be highlighted here is that very real institutional restraints exist for the expansion of the subject. These can be briefly categorised as follows:



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE (NUS)

The Sociology Department of NUS exists as part of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. From time to time it has (and still does) provide “export courses” for other departments or faculties in the university, for example Architecture (in Urban Sociology), and Engineering (in General Sociology). But for the most part, the objective of the department — to provide a comprehensive sociological education of international standard — has to fit within the institutional restraints of the faculty. These are primarily three-fold at the time of writing. Firstly, the degree structure severely limits the time that a student can spend on sociological topics; secondly, the range of topics that can be offered at any one time are limited; and lastly, the resources of the department are expected to be primarily devoted to undergraduate teaching. (These restraints are thus structural and have nothing to do with quality of staff, which is excellent in terms of qualifications, or with the number of staff, which is growing rapidly under the university’s expansion programme). These three points require some elaboration.

1. Degree Structure

The NUS Arts and Social Sciences Faculty has a structure involving two basic degrees — Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) (B.A. Honours) and Bachelor of Social Science (B.Soc.Sc.) (B.Soc.Sc. Honours). The B.A. degree is what the British University system used to refer to as a “general degree”. It involves three years of study, the first year being devoted to three subjects of equal weight and the second and third years to two major subjects and one minor subject. In the first year, each subject consists of two units and in the subsequent years each major comprises three units and the minor two units per year. A typical format for a student taking a major in Sociology might look as follows:

1st Year	Sociology (2 units)	Geography (2 units)	Chinese Studies (2 units)
2nd Year	Sociology (3 units)	Geography (3 units)	Statistics (2 units)
3rd Year	Sociology (3 units)	Geography (3 units)	Statistics (2 units)

No student can choose his major in his first year — the choice is made at the beginning of the second year and depends on examination results in the first