

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 7

'The arts disturb while the sciences reassure.' How true is this?

Zhang Junyu | 11S062

In the early 19th century, Mary Shelley wrote *'Frankenstein'*, a great literary masterpiece that questioned whether, in the unrelenting gallop of scientific advancement, humans, in their pursuit of knowledge and the quest to harness the Promethean flame, would overstep ethical and moral boundaries. This was at a time when the sciences were just blossoming, and their almost boundless potential seemed like the solution to all the problems of the day. Two centuries on, the same contrast exists between the arts and the sciences, with the arts painting a depressing picture of human nature and the future of humanity, while the sciences express limitless optimism. Indeed, it can be argued that the arts disturb, while the sciences reassure, as the two play starkly different roles in the world today.

Nowhere is this juxtaposition more revealing than in international social issues. Even as the arts over the ages have highlighted issues such as poverty and war, science has repeatedly touted its success in solving these same problems. This may partly be due to the nature of these problems, as they are largely due to social forces, well outside the jurisdiction of the sciences. For example, many art pieces and literary works deal with the social stigma associated with homosexuality, such as the *'Asian Boys Trilogy'* in Singapore, which deals with gay identity in Singapore. On the other hand, there is research optimistically suggesting that homosexuality may be due to genetics (which may lead a casual onlooker to infer that there is no more reason for the lack of social acceptance towards gays and lesbians than there is to one, say, born with a genetic disease). On the issue of inequality and poverty, films such *'Slumdog Millionaire'* and documentaries on slums in India bring to the attention of people in the world the extreme poverty and extreme wealth that exist in the world today. However, news on the scientific front suggests that there is much being done to improve the situation - Golden Rice, laden with vitamin A, which has helped millions of people suffering from Vitamin A deficiency, was made using genetic engineering, the new technology that has been touted as a cure-all medicine for the woes of today's world. The arts, which have taken upon themselves the duty to highlight the social problems in the world today, in the process of questioning the current state of society, indeed shake the faith people hold in the continued improvement of society, a faith founded upon the successes of scientific advancement.

Furthermore, while the sciences continually try to propose solutions for even the most worrying of global problems, the arts continually portray the inefficacy of current measures, shaving off (possibly misguided) confidence that science will always be able to overcome any challenges humanity faces through yet another leap in innovation. Indeed, scientists have come up with radical new proposals for geoengineering, to completely reform the Earth in order to deal with climate change through spraying particles in the atmosphere or launching mirrors out into space to block off the sun's rays. This may lead some countries and governments worldwide to conclude that their continued belligerent stance against environmental protection and carbon emission reduction is, at least in part, justified, as they can rely on scientific technology to pick up after them. Nonetheless, the arts rightly stress the urgency for reform on policies concerning the environment. Works such as Al Gore's *'An Inconvenient Truth'* spotlights the inefficacy of global efforts to cut carbon emissions (just look at the massive failures of the Kyoto Protocol and the Copenhagen Summit on climate change), arguably the only truly effective method to halt and reverse global warming. This is a typical example of a case where undue expectation for the sciences to provide the magic bullet for any problems faced by humanity is countered by the arts, which focuses on exposing the inconvenient truth.

However, opponents of this view would likely point to circumstances where the opposite seems to be true - situations in which the arts reassure and the sciences disturb. Indeed, the sciences, and in particular genetic engineering, are currently embroiled in a major controversy, a controversy



highlighted in *'Frankenstein'*. To many, the master in *'Frankenstein'* seems to represent the Faustian nightmare we may find ourselves in if humans continue to "play God", violating ethical considerations and disregarding the sanctity of life in our pursuit of scientific knowledge. To those who advocate curtailing research into such controversial areas such as cloning and genetic engineering, the unrelenting progress of the sciences certainly constitutes a worrying fact.

Some would also note that not all art is made to rebel against society. In fact, a major role the arts play in the world today is as a medium for culture to be transmitted and understood. *'The Great Gatsby'* was a defining book of American culture, which united the diverse melting pot of American society under a common American Dream. *'The Kite Runner'*, a bestseller that introduced Afghan culture to the world, is another example of a novel that allowed people all around the world to understand a certain culture. As a vehicle for culture, then, it would seem the arts have heightened understanding and unity throughout the globe.

At times, the arts may also allow countries to exert soft power on other countries, calming xenophobic fears. The rise of China has greatly threatened American hegemony in recent years, spawning many books that predict the rise of the Dragon of the East. However, in the same period from 2006 to 2010, the number of Confucius Institutes globally has doubled, showing how China is intent on utilising its traditional literature such as classic Confucian texts and Tang dynasty poems to calm fears of its rise and spread its message of a "peaceful rise".

Nevertheless, the arts still remain as the primary medium through which controversial views are aired, as artists continue to push against boundaries. It would probably be hard to find anyone who deems Piss Christ, a photograph of a plastic crucifix dipped in urine, pleasing to the eye; however, it remains critically acclaimed for its representation of the cheapening of religion in today's increasingly pragmatic world. As the arts continue to venture deeper into dangerous territory, making use of novel media through which to express themselves, they can only increase their ability to disturb. At the same time, countering this trend is the rise in censorship, which has been enabled through technological advancements, allowing governments to track changes in the artistic society and people of the world to boycott or criticise art works deemed too insensitive or unsavoury. Thus, while modern art experiments with increasingly controversial themes and media, science has allowed censors to remove these from the public eye.

The arts have always taken upon themselves to reflect on society in its time and age, often with great controversy and pessimism. The sciences, on the other hand, often brim with optimism about the advancement of humanity. While both are highly necessary in modern society, and it is impossible to argue whether one has brought more benefit to society than the other, it remains largely the case that the arts disturb while the sciences reassure.

Marker's comments:

An excellent response. Good use of examples to illustrate arguments for the most part. The arguments on how the arts reassure are, however, rather weak & brief!

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

To what extent does technology facilitate crime?

essay 10

Clement Chung and Chong Yee Ling

In the recent movie, *'The Social Network'*, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, hacked into a Harvard newsletter site to retract a defamatory statement issued by a rival. How he managed it was surprisingly simple. No, there was no furious typing on the keyboard as depicted in movies, nor were there any mathematical algorithms dancing across the computer screen. Zuckerberg simply guessed that the passwords used on Facebook by the editors were the same as those they used for their email. He then pulled out his database of passwords and voila, he was in. What this demonstrates is not the flexible morals of the Facebook founder, but that the increasing concentration of information and sensitive data available to people due to advancement in technology makes it increasingly easy to commit crime. Granted, recent technological advances like the security camera and car alarm do deter crime as well; however, I feel that technology facilitates crime, but only if the flaws within technology remain unaddressed, and if it falls into the wrong hands.

Detractors may argue that recent surveillance technology and crime deterring advancements make it harder for criminals to actually commit crime. With the increase in the amount of protection one can install in one's home, ranging from password encoded locks and fingerprint recognition software, it may seem that physical crime like burglary and housebreak may be deterred. However, this is based on the assumption that everyone has access to such technology and that everyone is willing to go the extra mile and fork out extra for such advancements. If that is not the case, crime generally does not decrease. What these advancements do is actually to divert physical crime away from that particular household, leaving others to seem more attractive to criminals. Crime has simply been diverted to another place.

Furthermore, with the onset of online banking and online financial transactions, criminals with an understanding of computers and technology now do not have to be physically present at the scene of the crime in order to steal money: there have been fake websites of OCBC bank, and even automated teller machines have been tampered with before. Criminals now can steal and rob someone from the comfort of their homes.

Again, detractors might argue, that passwords and safeguards are there to keep all this under control. Actually, the presence of passwords and safeguards increases a person's vulnerability to online crime or identity theft. Recently, Sarah Palin's twitter account was hacked. The hacker simply guessed the answer to Sarah Palin's secret question to gain access to the account. How? The hacker simply searched Wikipedia for personal information about Sarah Palin and, with a certain amount of guesswork, he was in. While there is merit in online banking and financial transactions, people have simply traded one hazard for another. They have traded the physical vulnerability of carrying cash for the online vulnerability of being phished, scammed or hacked, at any time. It can thus be seen, that technological advancements actually expose a person greatly to crime, and facilitates crime.

Technology does not only facilitate crime in these few ways; it also facilitates crime through online anonymity and through the influence of violence on impressionable minds.

With online anonymity, potential criminals may hide and disguise their identity, facilitating crime. An example from Singapore would be the two students arrested for posting racial slurs against Malays. The sense of security that comes from the anonymity of the Internet makes it increasingly easy to stir up racial tensions with a few strokes of the keyboard. Paedophiles also enjoy this online anonymity. This shows the increasingly dangerous world the Internet is. Paedophiles and people with criminal intent, can slip on a mask and commit crime easily. It is this ease that encourages



crime as it separates us from what we do and the consequences of our actions. In this way, crime is encouraged through technology.

Furthermore, with technology, wrong messages and violent content now can be transmitted to a greater number of people worldwide, with an even greater impact than before. Violent and bloody content in video games like Grand Theft Auto, where players can rape then kill prostitutes, desensitises youths to violent acts. Studies have shown that there actually is a positive correlation between the amount of violent games a child plays and the crimes he might eventually commit. The Columbine shootings were committed by two teenagers who were inspired by the film, 'Natural Born Killers', with its graphic footage of violence. These violent messages have an even greater impact and more wide-ranging influence than ever before, thanks to technology.

Granted, technology does help to deter crime. The local show, 'Crime Watch', encourages citizens to be alert and also broadcasts photos of criminals at large. Surveillance systems at museums deter theft of property. There is merit in technology, and to a small extent, it does deter crime. However, there are a few flaws in technology that inherently are easier to exploit and thus facilitate crime. As discussed before, online transactions are one flaw of technology; another flaw of technology is also its cost. More than one-third of the cameras in the Louvre museum are dummy cameras. Armed with the knowledge of where they are, criminals can easily commit theft. These two flaws of technology can only be addressed by an advance in technology. This leads to a never-ending cycle of crime prevention and crime, doomed to end in failure.

In fact, what technology has provided us with is a paradigm shift. With the increasingly efficient services that technology brings, security must be compromised in some way. This trade-off is the most fundamental flaw in technology today. As we move to a world increasingly dependent on technology, crime has adapted to exploit this fundamental flaw present. Unless this flaw can be addressed, perhaps by installation of biometric security systems everywhere, technology is vulnerable. But even this has flaws. There needs to be guidelines on what can be compromised and most importantly, technology has to be wielded in the right hands. Technology is just a tool that can be used for good or bad. Despite all its flaws, whether it can be used to deter crime all depends on what we do with it.

Marker's comments:

Intelligently interpreted. Good knowledge of technologies that was skillfully woven into analysis. You could have connected the concept of anonymity with community. It's not only deception but also the cloak of safety that brings perverts and fanatics together, encouraging and feeding the sharing of information and hate, or perversion.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 14

How important is history in shaping a country's future?

Chua Shun Lee 114 / 14

The fierce resistance that met French President Nicholas Sarkozy's proposition to raise the retirement age and postpone the age at which the French can receive pensions (from 65 to 67) in 2010 sparked widespread international criticism that his move to save the debt-burdened French pension system was too little, too late. After all, the political backlash that would accompany any attempt that is perceived to undermine the age-old French welfare system has deterred many past politicians from attempting reform. From this example, one can see that history is inextricably intertwined with the present and the future, and hence is important in the sense that it should always be considered. However, in examining this issue from a social, political, economic and moral standpoint, while history may be influential in determining a country's priorities, it is sometimes a necessary but insufficient condition for real change. In addition, a dogmatic adherence to history without making necessary adjustments for changing contexts can only reduce history to an irrelevance in shaping a country's future.

History is significant in shaping a country's future by reminding a country of certain priorities that can never be compromised in the quest for economic progress. In Singapore, our history of being forced into a state of independence after being spurned by Malaysia, and our subsequent struggle to establish ourselves as a nation has ingrained a mindset of alertness in our government, and an awareness of our vulnerability. This acute sense of vulnerability is the reason we continually seek to develop a source of homegrown water supply, through research into NEWater and desalination technologies, in order that Malaysia can never hold us hostage or gain an upper hand in our bilateral relations by virtue of our dependence on their water supply. The role that history plays in the governance of Singapore both today and for the future is best summed up by Minister Mentor Lee, in an interview for his latest book, *'Hard Truths'*, in which he reiterated the importance of youth in Singapore realising the fact that we can never afford to rest on our laurels.

In addition, history serves as an important marker that guides the direction of a country's future growth. In Germany, there is a strong sense of collective guilt over the atrocities the Germans committed during the Holocaust, and this desire to never repeat the mistakes of their elders is manifested not only in the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, which occupies prime land and is fully funded by taxpayers' money, but also by strict Holocaust Denial Laws. This consciousness of the need for inclusiveness and integration is exemplified by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's admission that "multiculturalism has failed" in Germany. Merkel's frank admission, the first among leaders of the European Union (EU) states, marked the start of genuine national soul-searching over this issue, a necessary prelude to any political change in the future. In this instance, history serves as a reliable guide by which countries can chart their future growth.

Moreover, historical events legitimise certain modes of societal action that are often instrumental in influencing the policies a country adopts. This is most clearly seen in France, where the ability of both public and private workers to go on strike without having their jobs threatened is a constitutional right. The success of the famous May 1968 strikes, which were driven by the youth's discontent with the state of affairs under General Charles de Gaulle's regime, cemented the reputation of strikes as both a legitimate and effective way to show one's discontent and advocate policy changes. In spite of the arguably hit-and-miss nature of mass protests in France, they have indubitably contributed as a form of check-and-balance for government policies, and played a part in France's robust civil society. The example of France shows that history often has a part to play in the development of societal actions that serve as avenues along which current and future government policies can be contested.

However, historical occurrences and contexts may sometimes prove necessary but insufficient in motivating citizens' efforts to effect change in their country. Dictatorships in Arabic nations such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya enjoyed decades of relatively peaceful rule despite their questionable treatment of their citizens, and it was arguably the advent of technology and the Internet that first generated the spark of discontent that eventually resulted in a successful, full-fledged revolution. Similarly, North Koreans endured decades of deprivation and suffering under Kim Il-Sung's and Kim Jong-Il's rule, but it was only when some in North Korea managed to gain access to foreign television broadcasts and, a minority, the Internet, that they began to harbour thoughts of defecting to South Korea. As these examples show, the oppressive histories of the Arabic and North Korean people required the availability of comparison that technological advancement provided in order for there to be discontent and for genuine change to be started.

Furthermore, the dogmatic insistence on certain policies as a result of history may actually impede a country's progress rather than contribute to its vision of the future. In Singapore, in the post-'65 years, the government justified its crackdown on Communists, through programmes such as Operation Coldstore by saying that Singapore, being a nascent state, needed political stability in order to survive. In the same vein, the government defended its paternalistic approach to governance with the claim that Singapore was only a democracy in its infancy, and hence required such 'heavy-handed' governance for its economic growth. While Singapore may indeed have been a fledgling nation-state in its post-'65 years, there is a need for both the government and the public to recognise that now that Singapore has attained economic prosperity, being ranked 2nd on the 2010 Legatum Prosperity Index for Per Capita GDP, it is time to allow our civil society to correspondingly mature. The withdrawal of political freedoms, such as the act of gazetting The Online Citizen as a political organisation, can no longer be excused as being for the good of our nation; it is important for formerly cherished mindsets to evolve alongside Singapore's growth as a nation. In this respect, history can be said to be unimportant to a country's future if our mindsets do not align with societal changes over the years.

Ultimately, history can serve as either a driver of or an obstacle to economic restructuring for the future. Compare the economies of Germany (the loser of World War 2) and Britain (one of the winners of the war): While Britain's economy is currently languishing due to the fact that much-needed structural reforms have not been adopted, Germany's economy is flourishing, with an unemployment rate of 7.3% that is the envy of most EU nations. Losing the war opened all the economic and social institutions in Germany to change, as nothing was deemed untouchable. Conversely, Britain's victory nurtured a culture of complacency and many necessary reforms were not enacted due to bureaucratic red-tape. These two examples illustrate that history is important in shaping a country's future, as the outcomes of history served as enablers or obstacles for economic restructuring that would eventually have ramifications for the countries' futures.

Indeed, history has proven to be instrumental in formulating a country's priorities, legitimising new and effective modes of societal action and driving or inhibiting economic restructuring. However, one must bear in mind that in some instances, history is a necessary but insufficient condition for societal change, and that an over-fixation on history without consideration of the evolving state of society can render history irrelevant in shaping a country's future.

Marker's comments:

Shan Jee, I enjoyed reading this. Good discussions here. You are a mature writer and you have provided a holistic picture of the topic. One point to consider: governments who cling on to the past can bring a country down. E.g. Japan: the economy was in the doldrums for the past ten years, and too many changes in leadership resulted in no set directions and Japan not adapting to global changes.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

Retirement is a redundant word today. To what extent is this true?

essay 19

Famed economist John Maynard Keynes once said, "When the facts change, I change my mind, what do you do sir?" Indeed, the world we inhabit today is vastly different from that of the past in which retirement prospects were nearly a given. All around the world the age of retirement is being raised, instead of lowered, thus accounting for the increasing sentiment on the ground that "retirement is a redundant word today". In my opinion, that is a harsh and unfair statement to make, as while we do see a decreasing trend in the instances of retirement, retirement cannot be said to be obsolete.

Governments worldwide have put measures in place to facilitate their citizens' retirement plans. This is perhaps best illustrated by Singapore's establishment of the Central Provident Fund, otherwise known as CPF. Every month, a certain percentage of an employed citizen's salary is channelled into his personal fund so as to allow him to accumulate sufficient 'reserves' to tide him through his years of retirement. The fact that the government has instituted this scheme seems to suggest that the government has its citizens' retirement plans in mind. There is a general consensus amongst Singaporeans that the CPF is to their benefit, as reflected by the lack of sustained backlash towards this paternalistic initiative, because to them, retiring in the future is not merely an option, but a very real destination.

However, it is not difficult to see why retirement might be thought of as an increasingly "redundant" concept in this day and age as more and more people choose to extend their working years and postpone their retirement.

The world is still recovering from the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, which affected all economies all around the globe. In our world of scarcity, this can only mean one thing – rising costs of living. Surely in the face of such circumstances, retirement would be a dim, shadowy prospect in the heads of middle-aged employees with families to feed. Furthermore, age brings with it medical ailments, like rheumatism, high blood pressure and weaker immunity to assorted germs and diseases. Therefore, curative medicines then become a necessity in the lives of these people, an additional expense. Should they give up their job, they will put their families' financial security as well as their personal health and wellness at risk; thus to these individuals, the idea of retirement as a "redundant word" would gain currency as it is a very hazy prospect indeed.

Additionally, the current economic climate has seen governments dole out fiscal measures so as to reduce or remove the deficit incurred by increased government spending in the immediate aftermath of the economic crisis in the years 2008 and 2009. Fiscal austerity would signal bad news for welfare states, like Sweden and Denmark, whose retired citizens depend on monthly payouts to get by. Thus, in Denmark, we see an unusual sudden expansion of the labour market, as ex-carpenters and shoemakers emerge from the dormancy of their retirement and begin to solicit for business again, if only to make ends meet. Government handouts are hence shown to be clearly inadequate to fulfil retirees' living expenditure. Retirement, therefore, is seemingly impracticable if one wants to cement one's survival in these hard economic times.

It is important too to acknowledge that the world is being plagued by the issue of an aging, as well as aged population. In Japan, the ratio of youth to middle-aged people is a startling 9:1. This means that for every nine retirees, there will only be a single youth to support them. Beneath the polished veneer of Japanese society, we see that there are old folks who hold menial jobs as chambermaids and cleaning ladies simply because they have no kith or kin to speak of, and therefore cannot afford not to work. Unfortunate social circumstances are thus shown to relegate the possibility of retirement to the backburners of, in this case, the aged Japanese worker's mind.



On a lighter note, retirement is a less common concept nowadays purely because we see middle-aged workers assuming incredibly important positions in society. In the past, the late fifties used to be the target age for retirement, but in recent decades, people are taking up the mantle of leadership or roles as key personnel upon hitting that very age bracket. Much hype surrounded the fact that President Obama, then aged 47, was one of the youngest in the history of American presidents. This was because most of his predecessors had all been in their fifties or sixties at the time of their presidency. In Singapore, the Cabinet reinstated Lee Kuan Yew as Senior Minister, after his retirement from his role as Prime Minister, and then as Minister Mentor, followed by a role as a senior adviser to the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) upon his retirement from his previous position. Thus, because political leaders play such a prominent role in our lives, their relative seniority in terms of age has led us to distance the concept of retirement from that of age, which many feel, is just a number. The same man, Lee Kuan Yew, allegedly remarked that he would keep working till the day he dies. If his views are reflective of that of his generation, then it is no wonder if many hardly consider retiring at all.

In sum, it is blasé and untrue to opine that "retirement is a redundant word today". The essay has shown that the instances of retirement are reduced because the economic climate simply does not permit them to indulge in such a luxury, and not because they do not entertain that thought. I am not proposing that people have begun to regard retirement as an outdated concept but that there has been a shift in societal perception of this phenomenon. No longer do people conflate the concepts of retirement and age; in fact, their rejection of this generalisation connotes a positive step towards a more inclusive, open-minded society.

Marker's comments:

Interesting essay: you have taken me on a journey – not a lengthy journey; yet it is relevant and engaging. You have a strong command of the language.

Good use of personal voice and very persuasive too. Very inclusive essay.

Some lack of clarity where definition of "redundant" is concerned.



General Paper Year 5 Common Test 1 (2011)

Education has resulted in only more inequality. Do you agree?

essay 34

essay 34

Throughout the course of human history, the power of education to empower the disempowered and strengthen the weak has not gone unnoticed. Long hailed as the "great social equaliser", education has also been described by H.G. Wells as an essential part of society and the human race's only alternative to "catastrophe".

In this day and age, however, there is some indication that education – here defined as a formal system for the teaching and learning of information and skills (including literacy and numeracy) – has only succeeded in "more inequality", both in the sense of exacerbating current divides between peoples of different backgrounds, and in the sense of creating new divisions between the educated and the uneducated. This essay will demonstrate that such instances of "more inequality" are due to the unequal implementation of education, rather than education itself, and that education continues to fulfil its purpose as a social equaliser around the world today.

There is no denying that the enhanced personal ability and social mobility granted to the educated have set them apart from the uneducated; if this were not the case, then the entire concept of education as a mode of empowerment would be null and void. It is no accident that two-thirds of the world's illiterate are concentrated in eight developing nations, some of which also see the world's lowest economic growth – such as in Ethiopia and Pakistan. Clearly, the skills imparted to those in well-performing nations have not only improved their lot in life, but bettered the situation of their nations as a whole. With more resources, these nations are then able to invest in better education systems, which further boost their economies, and over time, a divide is created between the rich, educated nations and the uneducated poor.

Within many developed nations, the education system is also designed to bring students who do well to a level of "higher" education: secondary or tertiary as the case may be. And in many cases, it is the rich who are able to afford the best education for their children from a young age, allowing them to easily obtain higher education while the poor are left behind. In this sense, within societies, education also amplifies existing divides between those who rise quickly through the system, and those who are, economically or otherwise, disadvantaged.

The problem here, though, is one of unequal distribution and implementation of education. If education of the same quality were made accessible to all, in each and every nation around the world, the above situations would not exist: all members of society would be equally empowered to change their socio-economic positions, and to pull their families (and communities) out of their current plight. But this is not logistically possible in today's world: insufficient infrastructure, ineffective legislation and deep-seated ways of life are all obstacles to the equal implementation of formal education around the world.

Taking a broader perspective, this is not to say that improvements have not been made. Within the last century, the world's literacy rate (defined as the percentage of people above 15 who can read and write) has risen to 82%, a figure unimaginable even for "developed" European societies in the past. And according to the CIA World Factbook, the world's school-life expectancy (or, the number of years one can expect to receive formal education) has risen to 11 years, which is higher than in some developed nations today (Singapore's, for example, is 10.1 years). While the implementation of education has not been perfect thus far, the world is certainly seeing advancements on this front – doubtless a factor for its rising economic performance.

This power of education to create change can be attributed, among education's many functions, to two main points. Both deal with solving the problem of inequality, and they are, namely, eradicating



illiteracy and innumeracy, and imparting the ability to understand and invoke one's rights.

The twin disabilities of illiteracy and innumeracy have trapped many around the world in what Amartya Sen describes as the "certainty of depravity". Being unable to read, write and count from a young age effectively disconnects one from the information available in today's world, and disqualifies one from white-collar jobs – and increasingly, blue-collar jobs as well – in any society. The limited stations in life available to one from this point represent a restricted social mobility, and a permanently lowered personal capacity. It is also profoundly difficult for the illiterate to obtain access to sanitation and healthcare later in their lives, and this is a key factor in the higher mortality rates of the uneducated. Education provides people with the basic skills required to move ahead in today's world, without which little or no progress – both individual and societal – can be made.

The other key purpose of education, with regard to inequality, is to give people the ability to understand and invoke their rights. As Robert Frost once wrote, education creates a populace that is "easy to govern, but impossible to enslave". In other words, it gives people awareness of the freedoms they are entitled to, and how to go about obtaining them. The capacity to understand and invoke one's rights is the first step towards gaining political and social representation for one's community, without which concrete changes cannot be made (in the field of education or elsewhere) to bring society forward. In this function, education now serves as a means of empowerment, by giving the disadvantaged the necessary pre-conditions to better their lives, and the lives of those around them.

Examples abound of places where education has fulfilled these two ends remarkably well, vastly reducing inequality and creating prosperity for whole nations. Japan is one such example. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, many resources were devoted to education and re-education, such that by 1913, the Asian nation was printing twice as many books as the United States. Although at that stage Japan was still vastly underdeveloped, and had a wide rich-poor divide, it was soon able to become the leading economy in Asia, and actually embark on an imperialist programme of its own in 1939. Singapore too, provides us with an example of education's power as a social equaliser. At the point of independence, Singapore was still a backward colony that depended on external trade for its revenue. More than half the local population were uneducated and lived in slums or farms around the island. The past four decades, though have seen tremendous improvements in the education system, and corresponding economic prosperity. Singapore now boasts a 95.9% literacy rate, and is home to the top feeder school in the world for the Ivy League universities. At the same time, Singapore has achieved the world's fourth highest GDP, and 74.4% of Singaporean households live in 4-room flats, larger apartments, or private property.

In both these case studies, the effects of education in reducing inequality – both for individuals and for the entire nation – are self-evident. While it has been acknowledged that unequal implementation of education in some parts of the world has led to greater inequality, this writer sees it as a confirmation of education's potential to change the lot of those who benefit from it. Education's overall results around the world today are testament to its power to reduce inequality by the twin means of eradicating illiteracy and promoting rights awareness, and thus, all things considered, it would be unfair to conclude that "education has resulted in only more inequality".

Marker's comments:

A refreshing big-picture approach to the question – I have enjoyed this response and have also learnt much from it! Well done!

An effective total refutation of given statement. Can it be true though, that all things being unequal (rich and poor children have different opportunities and resources, so people are not "equal" to begin with), even the same education results in "greater inequality"? Go for some 'balance' as well, Theophilus!



General Paper Year 5 Common Test 1 (2011)

Education has resulted in only more inequality. Do you agree?

essay 35

In today's modern age of globalisation, countries across the globe that have welcomed the breakdown of borders and increased economic and cultural exchange are now faced with a conundrum – that of further inequality. In the US, the gulf between the income of degree holders and high school diploma holders has been increasing, with the fruits of economic success over the previous few decades going almost exclusively to the top earners, whereas blue collar workers and those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy have seen their incomes stagnate or grow less proportionately to the economy as a whole. Education has been identified as the root cause of this inequality. However, is this indeed the case? This essay will show that, far from worsening the divide, education is in fact the "ultimate equaliser" that is most effective in remedying inequality, and the inequality that we see in our world today is due to the inequitable access to education, rather than the fault of education per se.

Prima facie, the argument that education exacerbates inequality seems true. As a matter of fact, undergoing higher education, such as receiving a Bachelor's degree, or perhaps a Masters or even PhD, has been associated with higher incomes, as compared to those with only a high school diploma or a post-secondary equivalent. Even among those who are highly educated, it has been found that those with even more education – like a PhD holder, as a general rule, command greater income in the labour market, than a "mere" Bachelor's degree holder. To an extent, this inequality has been worsened by globalisation, in what sociologists term the "Matthew Effect", alluding to the Biblical verse. As highly skilled workers face greater employability in a globalised world, in which their expertise is highly sought after, those who are educationally less qualified face increased competition from newly industrialising countries like China and India, with their large pools of labour supply. As such, the former see their incomes increase and the latter see their income decrease, a sign that inequality has reared its ugly head. Indeed, education can cause inequality to worsen.

Proponents of the thesis argue that education has contributed to inequality not only in terms of earning power, but also in the political arena. Especially in democratic but less developed nations (India comes to mind), the masses do not have access to education and even for those who do, the lack of infrastructure and resources has ensured that whatever education they receive is of minimal use at best. As such, when election season comes, the average uneducated Joe on the street is rendered incapable of making an informed, rational decision, as per the ideal of democracies, but rather falls prey to the demagogic leaning, mudslinging and intimidation rampant in these countries. Furthermore, the situation is worsened by the fact that there exists highly educated, wealthy elite in these countries who arguably have a monopoly on knowledge, thus giving them undue influence in the politics of their country. As detailed in the Man Booker Prize-winning book, *'The White Tiger'*, elections held in India, especially those in rural regions, are hardly fair as local gangsters are bribed to ensure that whoever votes against the favoured candidates are physically abused. In addition, candidates, who are usually more educated, resort to scare tactics and demagogic incitation in order to rile and hoodwink voters into supporting them, usually at the expense of Muslims or untouchables – members of the lower caste. Again, the thesis that education leads to inequality is seemingly upheld, as the masses' ability to effect constructive political change in democracies is handicapped by their education, or rather the lack thereof, whereas the elites who have had access to education are able to steer election results and exert undue influence on political outcome.

That being said, both economic and political inequality are not caused by education per se, but rather the lack of equal access to it.

While income gaps have indeed widened according to education lines, it is arguable that this inequality was precipitated by globalisation and that the capitalist market we live in actually perpetuates this inequality for the greater good of society by rewarding society's most productive members with a larger share of the economic pie. Hence, this inequality is largely inevitable



and to a great extent, a necessary evil. On the other hand, economic inequality resulting from discrimination has, in effect, been combated by education. A classic example of education at work in reducing economic inequality is that of women entering the workforce. Following the feminist movement of the 20th century, women have entered the workforce in ever-increasing numbers. However, it has been argued that inequality exists in labour as women are paid 70 cents for every dollar a man earns. This divide, however, has been dwindling in many modern economies that respect the right for women to work largely due to the fact that women today are receiving more tertiary education than in the past, thus increasing their productivity and becoming able to earn a larger salary as a result. In Japan, for instance, women make up over 60% of the university population. To be sure, gender inequality still exists today, with disproportionately fewer female captains of industries and politicians, but we see that the inequality has been narrowing because education has broadened a woman's perspective to beyond that of the household, such that she can exercise her right to choose whether to enter the workforce or join the political fray.

In addition, education has done more than to merely bridge the economic divide between genders; many social inequalities have been rendered less deleterious by education. For example, in Botswana, a relatively wealthy African nation, women who have received more education have fewer children, an indication of the fact that the power relations between a husband and wife, once tilted in the favour of the man, have now been restored to a more equitable state. This is because educated women, rather than capitulating to their husbands' demands, are aware of their rights and exercise greater influence in domestic relations and family planning. As such, education has resulted in women becoming able to exercise greater autonomy over themselves, reversing a millennia-old trend of unfair patriarchal dominance in many societies.

Lastly, the fact that many forms of inequality still exist today can largely be attributed to the unequal access to education. With regard to the abovementioned point on political inequality, that large swathes of the uneducated are able to be manipulated by a wealthy, highly educated elite is not a point against education. On the contrary, it further fuels the case for education to become more prevalent as the current flaw in the system is due not to education per se, but rather the unequal access to education. In establishing universal, quality education for all, the previously illiterate will then be able to participate in political discourse, hence correcting for former injustices. Similarly, after black slaves were emancipated following the civil war, African Americans still earned a disproportionately lower income and had disproportionately fewer representatives in government. While this could be attributed to persisting societal prejudices, to a large extent their lack of education is to be blamed as well. As education opened their doorway to greater economic opportunities, African Americans have similarly proved themselves to be capable leaders, thinkers and pioneers. The election of Barack Obama, himself a Harvard law graduate, into the White House is testament to the fact that education is indeed the "ultimate equaliser". So, in response to the inequalities of today, the answer can only be more education, not less.

In conclusion, there is a necessity to distinguish between two forms of inequality – inequality of opportunity, and inequality of outcome. In today's globalised, capitalist societies, universal education for all guarantees that everyone, as far as possible, is given an equal playing field and an equal chance to succeed, that is to ensure equality in opportunity. While this has usually led to a correspondingly more equal outcome, education in and of itself by no means guarantees everyone will receive an equal outcome. As such, education can indeed be a fault line by which inequality occurs – the educated earn a higher paycheck and can exercise greater influence in politics than their uneducated compatriots. However, this is not a consequence of education and in fact, can be ameliorated by the promulgation of further education, especially in areas where existing infrastructure fails to deliver quality education. In sum, the thesis that education has caused greater inequality is ludicrous, and on the contrary, education holds the promise of reversing inequality, that education is indeed the "ultimate equaliser".

Marker's comments:

Good examples and clear topic sentences. Your essay shows good engagement with issues pertinent to the question.

