

A Relook at Our Educational Priorities

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by

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In the effort of moving towards a knowledge-based economy, the competitive advantage of an educated labour force in high value-added and knowledge-intensive production is absolutely critical.

It might seem that, in the medium term, the human resources that have been accumulated would provide a springboard for a new generation of growth. While the topic of human resource development involves a myriad of aspects, the education facet here certainly merits further attention.

The educational and human resource challenge confronting the Malaysian economy today is one involving matching technologies and investments with the labour productivity and skills levels, not just currently available in the population, but what is going to be required by the population, particularly the industries. The implementation of any new technology without adequate human capital and organisational support is likely to create a mismatch between investment and manpower. In other words, the transition to the intermediate technology must allow sufficient time for the human resource base to efficiently absorb and adapt the new technology, a lag period attributable to the learning process that is going to take place.

Education serves national socio-economic development; the curriculum and the content of education should, therefore, be consistent with national development needs. It is no surprise then that it is in the area of curriculum that the most visible signs of change are becoming apparent over the years. Higher education systems, and universities in particular, are aware of the need to respond with more creative curricula and instructional methodologies to cater to a more diversified clientele and more varied functions. Specifically, there has been, and will continue to be, a growing concern with the quality of science curriculum and continued investment in scientific and technological institutions.

While universities play an important role in producing high-level manpower to meet social demands, the number and type of graduates they produce should also be related to national development needs and the structure of labour demand. Just because the demand for places in the universities exceeds the number of places available, planners should not consider the expansion of supply as socially or economically justifiable. Traditionally, the expansion of higher education has been made to correspond with productive employment opportunities so as to avoid wastage of resources as well as to prevent it from becoming a potentially unstable situation. This approach, still in practice in Malaysia, has worked well to the nation's advantage so far. However, changes in the global educational setting would be imperative for Malaysia to chart the future course of its education system, particularly in its dual quest of attaining industrialised status and becoming an education hub of the Asia Pacific region.

Though traditional methodology in education cannot meet the challenges posed by today's rapid progress, modern science and technology have radically changed the traditional educational practices, methods, means and pedagogy. Education in the new millennium has entered a new phase with computer aids, the internet, electronic video recording and satellite technology. This does not imply the demise of the traditional approach to education. In fact, there should be a mixture of both the traditional and modern approaches to education.

It is indeed encouraging that the government takes a serious commitment to education and commendable financial budgets have been provided progressively for education year after year. Allocations under development expenditure for education, which stood at RM2.8 billion in 2005, rose to RM5 billion in 2006 and, most recently, RM7.9 billion in 2007.

By and large, however, if the level of education does not secure someone the desired employment, then learning no longer satisfies its function of social advancement. If education is to play a pivotal role and become an integral part of the overall development, it must adapt to the needs of the ever-changing economic structures, technology and employment; otherwise educational outcomes will be separated from the social and economic fabric of the country. Reforms in human resource

development involve not only changes in policies and, hence the system, but also shifts in the way of forward thinking.

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