

IMPORTANCE OF BEING VERSATILE

Much has been said about graduate unemployment lately but, really, this issue is nothing new. What is new, and disturbing, is the tenacious nature of the problem. In the past, the problem was more cyclical and demand-related in nature, but with the growing job mismatch in the country, it appears now that the problem of unemployment is more structural. This, however, is inevitable, as the country transforms into a knowledge-based economy. While many factors have been cited as contributors to this problem such as lack of language and communication skills, experience, and creative, analytical and critical-thinking skills, as well as job mismatch, the issue of education and versatility of graduates clearly merits a relook here. While the term “graduate” encompasses all certificate, diploma and degree holders, the focus here will be on those at the university level only.

The main impetus to a higher level of development of a country’s economy lies in the general educational achievement of a country’s citizens. It is a fact, proven also by statistical data, that educational attainment is one thing and the right preparation for the world of work is quite another. We have to be careful here. Students within broad attainment categories may vary significantly in the extent and content of their knowledge and in their ability to think, learn and communicate. Knowledge and skills are likely to affect a student’s ability to eventually succeed in the labour market. The ability of students to succeed is determined, not only by the degrees they earn and the number of years that they attend school, but also by the quality and relevance of what they learn to the labour market.

Indeed, the employment prospects of graduates are of primary importance, not only to the individual graduates themselves, but also to the country at large. Granted that spending a number of years at a university should not serve only as a preparation for a job or a career, nevertheless, most faculties have had to continuously reconsider the structure and contents of their courses in order to enhance the employment prospects of their graduates. But in all fairness, universities are not solely to blame.

To realise or enhance the potential of graduates, industry and university necessarily need to understand better what is happening in each other's home territory, what needs to be tuned and how this can be achieved through constant consultation, monitoring and adjustment. In this context, the country needs to identify and forecast, with as much accuracy as possible, those areas of economic activity or new growth areas in which we can excel and the position we are at in order that our economy can progress further and better. Emphasis and concerted effort must be put on the disciplines which the economy will be needing in the coming years.

Industries should also work in consonance with universities by formulating their own master plans for the next, say 5-10 years, which could go a long way toward helping the latter churn out graduates needed by them. However, one should be mindful that not all can succeed in the same degree in this regard. This may depend on the course content, at least as perceived by potential employers, and whether a specific faculty services a captive job market or an open job market. Faculties need to be changed to make their graduates relevant to, and therefore successful in, a competitive market environment. Thus, the employability of graduates concerns not only the university but also employers, and the necessary interaction between the two must be complementary so that industry must be ready to develop what the university initiates and vice-versa.

In terms of the quality of university graduates, there are three types, namely, technical competence, innovation generation, and potential for growth. Technical competence refers to knowledge in a specific field, be it economics, engineering or any other. A mixture of technical competence and personal skills is called for in any job. Employment opportunities, in fact, vary from positions where technical competence is paramount to jobs and where good personal skills are indispensable. The challenge for the university is how to enable each student to attain his or her own individual balance between technical competence and personal skills, while the challenge for the industry is its readiness to provide adequate training to optimise these qualities. These challenges need to be

successfully met, taking into account also the fact that females make up over 50 per cent of the university student population.

In addition, globalisation and the information technology (IT) revolution are changing the global economic landscape, including that of Malaysia. The transformation of our economy from one that is production-based to one that is knowledge-based is leading not only to changes in the type of jobs being created but also to different methods of working and living. The significant demographic changes taking place will also influence the spectrum of jobs required in the future. Several factors are, thus, making prediction of future skill requirements in the medium-to-long term.

In such a situation, university undergraduate courses should be grounded in versatility, so that first degree students become graduates in versatility. Course structures should provide for guided versatility in both course content as well as in personal skills acquisition. Limited course specialisation at the first degree level is becoming a risk, rather than an investment, in today's technological environment. The necessary corollary to this is that most specialisation needs to be carried out in industry itself, whether manufacturing or services.

It is obvious that there is a serious mismatch between what the market wants and the type of graduates that is available in the country at present. It is a question of their employability in the current phase of economic growth, an attribute associated with their own characteristics in terms of skills and attitudes. This is made worse by the tertiary-level unemployment overhang that previously existed which will be further aggravated by the new graduates entering the labour market in the coming years. New demands will also be placed on the educational system to prepare for the job categories, both in the manufacturing and services sectors, which will place greater stress on our system. This has serious implications for our human resource strategy in the next decade or so and for our education system. All parties, economic planners and policy makers, educationists and the private sector, will have to play their respective roles in this endeavour. Graduates themselves, too, should hold a pragmatic view on employment expectations.

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