

## **What is our priority?**

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**NATION-BUILDING VS KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION:** Graduates of the system should be able to think for themselves.

ON the eve of the formation of the nation state, the government set up a committee under Datuk Abdul Razak Hussein (later Tun) to come up with a national education policy after the first federal elections in 1955.

Its 1956 Razak Report stated that the national education policy's main objective was national unity.

Until the present, parents have never considered nation-building a priority in education. Even education authorities have spoken more of the importance of science and technology, while the system increasingly has given priority to examinations.

After August 1957, the authorities announced that the education policy would give priority to knowledge of the nation and began by rejecting the approach of the so-called colonialists in order to inject the spirit of patriotism and nationalism.

It was no longer geared towards the acquisition of knowledge or the education and socialisation of each child in the school.

But it was also not possible for the British to establish a uniform system, as there was agitation in favour of the perpetuation of the vernacular system. Finally, it was settled that the vernacular system could be perpetuated at the primary school level.

All children should move into national schools at the secondary level, but the government would allow private vernacular schools to exist. English-medium secondary schools were also allowed to exist but no private Tamil secondary school was established.

The younger generation of Malaysians did not become more curious and more concerned with scientific explanations. With the de-emphasis on the non-science subjects, the younger generation has become less inclined towards intellectual exercises.

The acquisition of language skills also declined. Although Bahasa Melayu has been widely taught, teachers of more recent times do not measure up to those trained in the past in the Sultan Idris Training College or the Language Institute.

English has continued to deteriorate while globalisation has changed the whole perspective of international relations, not just politically but, perhaps more importantly, economically.

The first English-medium school -- the Penang Free School -- was founded in 1816. The Cambridge School Certificate was introduced by the last quarter of the 19th century and students were pursuing tertiary education overseas.

When plans were ready for the University of Malaya (which materialised in 1949), pre-university education was introduced. These classes were called post-school certificate classes, later Higher School Certificate classes, but not long after 1957, they became known as Sixth Form.

In the pre-Sixth Form days, students were treated as pre-university students. But as Sixth Formers, they were treated just like other schoolchildren.

They were not given the freedom to use their initiative; in due course, they became dependent on their teachers for notes. The schools did not make attempts to build up the library to ensure that all students with aspirations to study in universities would have the opportunity to acquire research and essay writing skills.

There were further setbacks when local universities decided to adopt the American semester system and dispensed with the term system, which had been in vogue since the University of Malaya opened in 1949.

The latter enabled students to participate in extracurricular activities during the first and second terms before focusing on examinations in the third term.

Students now face three examinations a year. They also find it difficult to do research in the library and have become dependent on notes.

Students also have little time for all other forms of activities and few, if any, are able to represent the country in sports today.

Since the early 1970s, they have been prevented from organising activities of their own and in the process, learn to be more independent when they graduate. They have come under the total control of the deputy vice-chancellor for student affairs.

Now the authorities, ironically, talk repeatedly about the importance of "soft skills". Much time is now spent trying to help students acquire soft skills without realising that soft skills cannot be learnt by attending lectures. They need to be allowed to have actual practice.

Education is best understood by those who have had years of exposure to the handling of school-children and university students.

And it must be realised that culture plays a crucial part in the ability of students to adjust to a particular system of education. Asian students are different from Western students.

The latter are far more independent. They are used to having dialogues with their teachers and expressing their thoughts and ideas. In Asian societies, there is a long-standing tradition which asserts "the teacher is always right".

The time has come for the authorities to ask the simple question: "What is the purpose of education?"

Is it to produce students who will all give the same answer to a particular question, or should it produce young men and women who are not afraid to think for themselves?

They should be able to distinguish between answers which are logical and answers which are merely assertions. More importantly, differences of opinions between two parties are to be expected and should not lead to conflict. If such an understanding could prevail among students, in the larger society, differences of opinions would not lead to political instability.

Education may not solve all human problems but can help produce a society that allows the majority to live in comparative harmony.

The famous Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, said long before India achieved independence that "in order to build a nation, first build a school".