

## **Liberal education is what we need**

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**PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES:** We have to revisit our approaches to produce students who can think for themselves

**MALAYSIANS** have always been proud of the country's strong education system. Our school leavers and university graduates are readily accepted by universities worldwide.

The Education Ministry continues to build on these strengths as we prepare the next generation of Malaysians.

Science and technology will continue to shape the world.

The old Malaysian educational target of achieving the 60:40 ratio of science to arts students in our schools has again surfaced as the immediate challenge. As expected, the debate has been dominated by the means to get there.

I would like to advocate an education system that is more flexible and diverse -- the good old liberal education.

This is defined by the American Association for the Advancement of Science as "ideally, a liberal education produces persons who are open-minded and free from provincialism, dogma, preconception and ideology; conscious of their opinions and judgments; reflective of their actions; and aware of their place in the social and natural worlds".

It was further elaborated that liberally educated people are expected to be sceptical of their own traditions. They tend to push assumptions to the limit; all the time thinking for themselves rather than defer to authority.

Adoption of liberal education would enable both our school and university education to cultivate "active citizenship" through off-campus community service, internships, research and overseas experience (OE).

In New Zealand and Australia, the OE and "civic engagement" of students with off-campus communities are seen more pedagogically powerful than traditional classroom teaching. They enhance the purely intellectual and scholarly education occurring in schools or campuses.

An all-inclusive liberal education system can provide students with greater choice to meet their different interests. Besides the choices of their academic fields, students need to take greater ownership of their learning.

They need to be able to choose what and how they learn. Hands-on curriculum that engages them in and out of classroom learning is required to nurture all-round or holistic development.

We need to revisit our approaches. Equipping our students with the different skills deemed important in developing a specific competency is outmoded nowadays.

Success today increasingly hinges on multi-skills and out-of-the box thinking. Specialised training in academic fields of science, especially at the secondary level, would only serve to stifle growth of the students' potential.

Our education system should seek to nurture our young with the different skills they need for the future. What better skills can we develop to their full potential than to allow and facilitate every child to find his or her own interest?

Their talents can be nurtured so that they can emerge from schools confident of their individual abilities. Our educational goal then is not primarily to place them into a career-oriented mould but to encourage them to pursue their passions in whatever fields of science, arts or sports.

For a sustainable future in an innovation economy, Malaysia's educational system ought to promote a diversity of talents among her younger generation.

We need young Malaysians who ask questions and look for answers. Only then would they seriously think about ways to solve problems. Only then would they innovate.

Apart from being innovative, we need a new generation of Malaysians willing to work hard. Liberal education can help inculcate sound values that build individual strength and character.

They need to be resilient without being unduly discouraged. Liberal education was never seriously advocated in Malaysian schools and universities. This is because liberal education has been wrongly perceived.

Local educationists help propagate such a view of almost equal emphasis between the vocational training and the teaching of civic and personal values.

But today's advanced countries, led by the United States, have given prominence to the adoption of liberal education in their education system.

The curriculum provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and learning strategies in addition to in-depth study in at least one academic area. These countries are handling the challenges of an innovative economy extremely well.

Our future development and sustainability in an innovation economy would ultimately rest on every Malaysian developing a passion for life-long learning. The means to the above may just lie in a liberal education for future generations.

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