Higher education: The way towards Vision 2020

If you look at our student enrolment in higher education, the figures show an interesting trend that needs immediate attention. Last year, for example, there were 680,000 students in both public and private institutions pursuing a bachelor’s degree, whereas there were only 64,000 master’s students, and 28,000 doctoral students. If these figures showed a typical trend in this country, it certainly showed that Malaysians have no interest in pursuing higher education either at the master’s degree level or even higher. Why is this a trend in Malaysia? Is it a temporary phenomenon? Or is it a common sight in other countries too?

From the statistics, it is apparent that the interest of the general population towards a master’s or a doctoral study is not particularly encouraging. And at the same time there may be numerous practical reasons that stand in the way of furthering studies, for example, graduates could be saddled with massive undergraduate loans, combined with a salary that is inadequate to cope with the current cost of living, and employers who don’t appear to give value to employees with higher qualifications through an increased salary, or show other forms of support, may contribute to the lack of enthusiasm of the younger generation to pursue higher education. There is also a ‘quick fix’ disease among some people to acquire qualifications through ‘bogus’ awarding institutions. Often, I hear people talking about ‘working smart’ rather than ‘working hard’. This pathetic attitude is poisoning the minds of some of our younger generation about the real meaning of ‘experience’ and subsequently fail to understand the meaning of ‘learning’ or what education is all about. That could explain why the police were able to uncover bogus degree holders and fake institution providers in our media recently. The sad part is our people easily fall into this trap.

Looking at the way things are going, it seems that there is a need to have a wake up call and make it clear how important a specialised education is, or we will witness Malaysia being downgraded economically due to our inability to nurture and educate our talents to the highest level of knowledge, competency and skill. Our lack of focus in this area is disturbing, as there are many industries, both locally and globally, that are expanding rapidly and in need of specialists. This demand for the niche and knowledgeable personnel is expected to grow in high demand, and people should be made aware of these opportunities so that we can avoid an acute shortage of specialised experts in the next few years.

There are two things that we can do at this point. One is to identify specific areas of specialisation in which we are in dire need of personnel, and the other is to get people to understand the importance of investing in education. One of the challenges that we are facing right now is the lack of new knowledge. Many people believe that with ICT, they have acquired new knowledge. But information is only knowledge when it is put into application. As such with a lot of information, we face an overload of information that is often misinterpreted as ‘new knowledge’.

One classic example is the automotive industry in many emerging economies. In the early 1990s, many auto industries in certain countries failed to become global because they were not innovative and not willing to invest in new knowledge. As such, they continued to produce cars with outdated designs and technology. In the same collorary, if we don’t invest in education and seek new knowledge, through obtaining higher degrees, we will become white elephants and dinosours of the 21st century.

This is not the future we want for our industries, and the way to avoid this is to open the minds of potential students, broaden the scope of their choices. There needs to be a concerted effort by the parents, government and the institutions of higher education to do this. Our people should learn to take risks and be more forward looking when it comes to their education. Investing in a good degree rather than one that you can afford but may not have as much knowledge impact in your chosen field is a starting point that combines risk taking and progressive thinking. Malaysians should search for knowledge and educate themselves at every opportunity. After all education is a lifetime investment.

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