Beyond traditional career choices

One of the concerns we must address in our quest to become a high income nation is the dearth of professionals with the knowledge, expertise and experience to help the country move forward more aggressively to achieve our goals. Many young Malaysians are not aware of the vast range of career possibilities and the numerous areas of expertise the nation is in need of.

We often hear people say I want my son or daughter to be a doctor, accountant, or lawyer. Rarely do we hear parents saying I would like my child to become a heart surgeon, ophthalmologist or oncologist. We never hear anybody declare they want to be an expert in international business law. We have so many lawyers but most of them are involved in litigation, conveyancing, and corporate law.

I was told in the field of taxation, the number of experts we have is very small compared to the number of tax services required. That is why we have a Bachelor’s degree in Taxation at UNIRAZAK. Most schools have a Bachelor of Accounting degree with specialisation in Taxation, which is different. A Bachelor’s of Accounting in Taxation means you become an accountant and know a little bit about taxation. However, the Bachelors of Taxation programme at UNIRAZAK will train you to read the balance sheet and understand the fundamentals of accounting, but you will learn more about tax or revenue law.

This is an area where there will be a demand in the future but people cannot see it yet. Later when they realise they need a tax expert or advisor, they may have difficulty finding one. Professionals do not magically appear when we need them. It takes years of training to become an expert.

A developed country has to be able to fulfil the needs of its citizens. This means, for example, that we must make sure that our general hospitals in every state have enough specialists. We should not have to fly patients from Johor Bahru to Institut Jantung Negara in Kuala Lumpur because we don’t have enough heart surgeons in Johor Bahru, but this is what’s happening now.

I believe not enough is being done to steer the young towards fulfilling the future needs of the country. We need to look at this carefully so we can nurture the younger generation and guide them to focus on more specific areas, rather than just saying I want to be a doctor, lawyer or engineer.

We must also learn to appreciate the expertise of our people and put them to good use. For example, we have thousands of graduates in Islamic Studies today, particularly in the field of syariah. But what are they doing? These graduates are most probably employed as ‘bilal’ or assistant imams. And if they are lucky, they will be employed in certain syariah courts in certain states. But their knowledge in syariah has not been put to real value to society.

Good graduates in syariah should be able to help Muslim families resolve issues pertaining to marriage, inheritance and such. They can be employed as Islamic advisors or counselors. There are cases where husbands leave their wives without officially divorcing them and the wives are left hanging. These matters require the expertise of people with syariah qualifications who can advise on the processes and procedures to properly resolve them.

We should not stereotype our graduates when it comes to their qualification but instead help them explore all the possibilities. An engineering graduate does not necessarily have to become an engineer. If he has an interest in law, he may also pursue a law degree and combine his expertise to offer legal advice on building contracts, safety issues and such. Then, he would have created a niche for himself.

When I was studying for my PhD in France, my professor had a bachelor in mathematics, a master’s degree in engineering, and a doctorate in finance. These areas of knowledge are complementary and as such, can broaden one’s career prospects. Somebody with a degree in health sciences and who is also trained to be a journalist will be able to communicate a health issue and all its complexities more easily to the public than a general journalist would. And this would be a unique area of specialisation and one that I believe we are lacking in the country at the moment.

In fact, there are many areas of expertise that we need to identify and prepare for if we are serious about becoming a developed nation. And the time to get started is right now. The combination of undergraduate degree, professional qualification and postgraduate degree required to develop a professional who is truly an expert in his or her field can take anywhere from five to 10 years. People do not become experts overnight.

We can no longer afford to have a myopic approach to developing our human capital. We need to look beyond traditional career choices and open the eyes of our young to the exciting range of prospects in specialised and multi-disciplinary areas. Then, we will be able to develop a diverse pool of experts who can meet the human capital needs of the nation.

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