

[Home](#)

MY SAY: Making work experience and training count

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The UK's Shadow Secretary of State for Education Andy Burnham recently made a suggestion that could be beneficial to us as we reconstruct our vocational and technical education system. Burnham suggested that work experience placements or training should be advertised to give everyone a chance to try out for them, especially those with poor and disadvantaged backgrounds and are most likely to miss out if offers are confined to "conversations around the dinner table" or arranged through connections.

As jobs become scarce, work experience and on-the-job training have become the "new" criteria for employers seeking suitable candidates. These are informal and unofficial requirements but have created a Catch-22 situation for many.

Without work experience or training, the chances of landing a job are slim, but with no opportunity to get a job or participate in a training scheme, there can be no experience. Besides, there are only so many places open for work experience these days and there is an expanding student population that needs work experience placements. Meritocracy aside, having no work experience can be a barrier for most job-seekers.

Gone are the days when work experience was regarded as part of on-the-job training arranged by employers so that one could fit the job one was hired for. In the training of healthcare, engineering and legal personnel, work experience is mandated in an organised manner and known by various names, for example, well accredited and supervised. There are structured mechanisms through which one can acquire the necessary experience for the purposes intended, including employability.

The same cannot be said of the other professions despite many employers insisting on "tailor-made" graduates. Unless they too come up with a structured programme for work experience that can be tailor-made, it would not be fair to insist on it. What's more, today's work experience placements are largely unpaid or poorly. While some kind of mandatory requirements are fast emerging, there are no regulations, so there is no transparency.

What this means is, as Burnham alluded to, the talent of millions of students will go untapped. "It remains possible for children from poorer backgrounds to climb high. But it is harder for them if, unlike their more privileged peers, they have never seen the inside of a barrister's chambers or PR agency or newspaper," he said.

In the meantime, many are said to be turning to vocational training as an option to get work experience and apprenticeship. They prefer to learn and earn rather than be deprived of a meaningful job or be cheated of one because the system is not well organised. One could become a cheap pair of hands.

As Malaysia is now trying to reconceptualise its vocational and technical education system as part of the integrated talent build-up under the New Economic Model (NEM) and the Economic Transformation Programme, the points that have been raised by Burnham deserve a deeper discourse. Many countries, not only developed but also developing like Brazil, have moved in the right direction. But none of their methods can be superimposed on another without taking the local idiosyncrasies into account.

The aim, nevertheless, is to convince employers to put their money where their mouth is if they want tailor-made employees — much like the professionals who are trained and accredited. And the best way is to work closely with vocational and technical institutions with the involvement of universities.

Universiti Sains Malaysia is currently working on such a scheme in partnership with the Northern Corridor Implementation Agency (NCIA) and Deloitte Malaysia. The Human Capital Development Initiative, or better known as the Regional Talent Repository, is aimed at narrowing the mismatch between the supply of and demand for talent, using the electrical and electronics industry as a template.

The scheme will consider how best to build awareness of the relevance of work experience and where to seek it, and match talent with the right employer. The need for this is mentioned in the concluding part of the NEM: "Employers should have a greater say in the vocational and skills-training curriculum. It is essential that a cluster approach be adopted to take advantage of the scale economies and proximity to the industry, for example, the Human Capital Development Initiative of USM-NCIA-Deloitte."

This is a bottom-up effort that should be supported so that it becomes a part of the existing employment ecosystem. It can, in fact, boost Talent Corporation's efforts — at the sectoral level — to move away from the

current silo structure that serves individual needs. There is a long way to go, but the scheme is a good starting point to make employability a more equitable opportunity by providing work experience all around.

But the industry must get its act together as well.

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