

Return the soul to education

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Comment

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THERE was another low-key but significant event alongside the 5th Islamic Conference of Ministers of Higher Education and Scientific Research (ICMHESR) organised by Innovation and Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation last week.

About 40 vice chancellors, presidents and their representatives met to discuss the future of higher education in Muslim countries. Dubbed the Muslim Universities Vice Chancellors'/Presidents' Forum (MUVCF), it complemented the meeting of the ministers.

Education -- even more so higher education -- is a challenging issue the world over and it is no different in the Muslim world. In 1977, the First World Conference on Muslim Education was held in Mecca, and the latest -- the seventh -- was hosted by Malaysia. This is an indication that higher education has always been a key agenda, at times leading to the establishment of universities.

At the opening of the 5th ICMHESR, Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin says that the time is ripe to look beyond budget allocation in striving to improve quality education. He emphasises that quality education is about development of the mind, personality and enhancement of an individual's potential for the advancement of a learning society.

His statement resonates with the discussion at MUVCF where the participants declared that there is an urgent need to look into the approach to higher education collectively in order to develop minds with Islamic values. The focus is on criterion-referenced approach to higher education as opposed to one that is norm-referenced. The latter is derived from a Eurocentric system with several inherent flaws in two issues.

First is an intellectual one; the other, structural. Both are plaguing the tertiary education system. Apart from being Eurocentric, the present intellectual base is also anthropocentric and androcentric in nature. The former results in the current state of ecological degradation marred by species extinction, whereas the latter is a male-biased system that tends to compromise the mobility of the female population.

Realising that the current intellectual orientation also tends to neglect tradition -- both Islamic and indigenous knowledge as well as wisdom as a source of inspiration -- it is imperative to broaden the concept and sources of knowledge. This relates closely to issues of epistemological methods of argumentation to arrive at knowledge and in the quest for truth. At present the emphasis is on scientific demonstrations (*burhan*), which is deemed inadequate. The view is that there is a need for greater exposure to dialectics (*jadali*), rhetorics (*balaghah*), sophistics (*safsata*) and poetics (*shi'ir*) to generate more creative minds. This will allow for a richer spectrum of new knowledge and alertness to foreign ideas that may be culturally incompatible or detrimental to local and indigenous beliefs and wisdom.

This issue, in turn, has to do with what is termed "the global division of labour in knowledge generation" and has further led to the enhancement of Eurocentric ideas and academic dependency. Much of today's theoretical knowledge, for example, has been the domain of the developed countries, which have the upper hand in framing ideas and shaping technology as well as research.

Meanwhile, some countries are confined to applied work based on theories produced by the West. It is worst when the work is funded by the West, making the cycle of knowledge generation and utilisation complete. Consequently, it is very much Western-driven and prone to brain drain.

Such is the prevailing global knowledge structure that creates advantages in the developed world, and put others at a disadvantage unless they are determined to break out of it. For this to happen, the governance of the institution must be boldly constructed to allow for the reformation of the higher education sector and doing away with the tendency towards academic dependency.

Simply put, there must be room for academic freedom and autonomy, as well as experimentation of new ideas, unlike what is happening today in many Muslim universities.

A new construct that is not detrimental to the primacy of knowledge in a holistic sense must be put in place.

MUVCF has successfully focused on issues that affect the quality of education beyond the numbers game. It took a bolder stance to critique the present situation that has long been accepted as the only benchmark. The forum attempted to reconstruct a new model that is equally inspired by universal and Islamic values alike.

And at the end of it all, return the soul to higher education as a mark of true quality.

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