

Winning the education World Cup

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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THE FIFA World Cup 2010 final that saw Spain becoming the champion for the first time fires the imagination of the public as to what is possible when the playing field is level.

Add to this the style of the game displayed by the Spanish team -- powered by a tactical mental agility that enabled them to outperform the opponent's aggressive harassment -- and you have a beautiful game.

In many respects the pursuit of knowledge can also be a "beautiful game" that can stimulate the imagination too, through a process that demands mental prowess.

This is in essence the message delivered at the Inaugural Eminent Persons Lecture Series entitled "Leaders Building Leaders: Towards Excellence and Global Competitiveness in Higher Education" by the Raja Muda of Perak Raja Dr. Nazrin Shah last week. In his speech, the prince-scholar reiterates that the one imperative that will invariably propel the nation forward is education.

This is indeed the clarion call for the higher education system given the level of competition worldwide.

The strategy is to first transform the higher education scenario. We must create a level playing field through the process of transformations so as to allow for the expansion of the coverage of tertiary education, the reduction of inequality and the institution of an appropriate governance structure, among others.

Raja Nazrin quoted Abraham Lincoln on the need to "think anew" and "act anew" which views higher education as, at best, a work in progress that welcomes active and constructive debates. It is about meeting future challenges head-on amid the changing global sociopolitical scenario, which highlights the need to innovate in a continuous manner. In short its "business unusual".

Conventional wisdom and the current paradigm must not be treated like sacred cows! Our obsession with education linearity in the search for educational excellence cannot rely on the old formula to surge ahead. The existing paradigm based on the industrial model has proven to be incapable of articulating the needs of the post-industrial age. The trend towards a one-size-fits-all "fast-food model" of education has impoverished instead of enriched it.

What then is "educational excellence"? It poses the question: "Is it just about international ranking?"

We must be clear about our goals while recognising the various demands made on higher education. One call would be from those who pursue knowledge for its sake, driven by curiosity and the need to know. There can never be enough of such students.

Secondly, there are those who are career oriented and regard education not just as a mean to an end but also an end in itself.

Finally, some are so narrowly focused on income that they find the shortest route with the least possible effort. Such "reluctant students" would prefer the "commoditised" form of knowledge: pre-packaged, predigested, ready to be consumed and regurgitated.

We need to be mindful of the state of flux that the world is currently in and the number of unfamiliar emerging issues with no clear-cut solutions and answers.

We need to seek a new world view so that the quest for excellence is not "hollow" where the meaning of life is missing! Higher Education Deputy Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah raised this concern in his welcoming speech at the lecture series.

Raja Nazrin's thought-provoking and inspiring address resonates with many issues that are confronting higher education not only in Malaysia but globally.

Each country is busy charting its own approaches in reshaping the future given their own demands and relevance. Raja Nazrin was spot on when he remarked that Malaysia need not apologise for focusing on higher education to meet its sociopolitical objectives and create more "functional" universities that others are now rediscovering including those in the developed economies.

Still, the strive for excellence amounts to challenging the status quo. Malaysia being the 11th most popular destination for higher education has much to do.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my
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