

No more universities, please!

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Comment

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LAST week, most dailies carried a picture of a girl handing a note to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak expressing a desire for a university in her town.

You cannot help but admire her for expressing her wants. And a university is not a bad choice either! She is not alone in this regard.

Practically all states have at least one tertiary institution -- some have more than their fair share in proportion to their population. At one point, each state even wanted the person heading the institution to be its native as well. Fortunately, this request has run its course, but this does not detract from the fact that there are still demands for more higher education institutions.

And the best time to make demands is when there is an election in the air!

The reality is that we have far too many universities relative to the number of post-secondary institutions of higher learning, such as polytechnics.

At the last count there are 20 public universities, and more than double -- including university colleges -- that in the private sectors.



*Students at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.
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and comprehensive in nature*

Lately, there is news of an upgrade to a few universities. It is interesting to note that at one time the public sector had six university colleges, which were regarded as universities later for non-academic reasons. This move accounted for the rise in the number of universities overnight!

Education at university colleges are biased towards the industry. Unlike universities, which tend to be broad-based and comprehensive in nature, university colleges are focused on serving the immediate needs of industries.

In many ways, university colleges are industry-led and have been proven to be a success in highly industrialised countries such as Germany. Their graduates are hands-on and relevant to demand. In other nations, university colleges may take different forms (though not as universities as such) but serve the same purpose generally.

The recent National Economic Advisory Council (NEAC) report made mention of an "increasing emphasis on reintroducing vocational and technical colleges" as a policy measure.

We lack such facilities. The trend is to create universities as though intermediate post-secondary institutions, in particular, the technical ones, are not important at all. Therefore, a vacuum exists today - one that must be immediately filled if the New Economic Model is to be realised.

While admittedly there are many training centres in Malaysia, they can be better integrated and realigned to fill the existing vacuum.

It would be better to place all of them under one entity that is able to coordinate training in a more meaningful way.

Education and training are not one and the same thing. When industries called for "tailored-made" graduates, what is intended is the latter rather than the former per se!

It is not possible for universities to "tailor-made" their graduates for many reasons. It would not be prudent for them to undertake the exercise at the expense of a more wholesome education.

The NEAC report also noted that "the labour market is ineffective in conveying information on the type, quantity and quality of skills needed by employers".

Those who were hiring have been heard to say that they do not want to over-train employees for fear of losing them. Such misplaced attitudes are not helpful at all as "about 80 per cent of the Malaysian workforce have qualifications only up to Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia level or its equivalent" according to the NEAC findings.

We would do well to restructure the existing top heavy education system. The immediate need is not another university but along the lines of a technical and vocational institution to bridge the lower level education with that of tertiary, keeping the industry in mind.

This also means that university colleges are not to be regarded as "universities-in-waiting" as commonly understood today. They should exist in their own right!

Failing to understand and execute this basic educational idea in bringing about more order to the realignment of the various institutions will only complicate the current situation.

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