

## The business of education

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

New Sunday Times - 02/21/2010

THERE is a slogan adopted by many winning sports teams the world over which reads: "Be the best by recruiting only the best!"

It simply means that success is ensured if you take on as many of the "best" people that you need to do a job, give them a target to meet (such as scoring goals) and then reward them well.

If they fail to deliver, then fire them and hire others.

Apply this formula to education and you will create what appears to be winning institutions. Many have proven that it works wonders.

However, there remains one significant question: who can afford to pay for the "best"?

As football becomes a professional sport (read: commercialised), evidently the "best" players will work only for the highest bidder.

Their aim is to make as much money as possible and then leave for more!

Sadly for the club that cannot afford to play this money game, it has to stay "mediocre" (relative to the definition of the "best").

This also means that the less-than-best will have to remain so until they make the "best" grade on their own.

Few make it by chance, but thousands more are condemned to a life as "losers".

If you apply this to the education context, suddenly it ceases to be "education" as we know it — that is about making the "best" out of the so-called "mediocre".

Logically, the more the education system follows this formula, the more success it would have in producing the *crème de la crème*.

In reality, "buying" success takes away from the true purpose of education.

This is where education fails to be the leveler of society.

Following this line of reasoning, what has happened to Haiti is not entirely unexpected.

The same goes for other countries on the periphery of poverty that struggle to be among (the misguided notion of) the "best".

Take the Dominican Republic, for example, which houses the oldest American university, Universidad Santo Tomas de Aquino, founded in 1538 but closed down in 1832.

An attempt to reopen it in 1914 as the Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo (Autonomous University of Santo Domingo) failed to make a difference to the quality of education it offered.

So what is the future of education? Will it follow the path of the much hyped football clubs — where winning matters and only the select few can win?

If this is the case, what is left of education — apart from being a place to harbour educational mercenaries — is only waiting to move on to the highest bidder!

Has education finally become a business?

What happened to being a community of scholars who acts as the conscience of society?

Are universities today really about societal well-being? Or is it more about profiteering from it in the name of education?

If so, what is the purpose of being the "best" when the objective is all too mediocre?

Furthermore, what will be the response of academia when global agenda such as the Millennium Development

Goals, which are related to humanity, come to a close by 2015?

And what about Education for All which will also end the same year?

Or what about the four billion people who have yet to reach their potential?

Can we still stand tall and say with certainty, "yes, we are the 'best' because we enable others to be (so) and not merely entice the best to be the 'best'?"

Answering this with a resounding "Yes" means we are in desperate need of a wake-up call that will stir us from our educational complacency!

\* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at [vc@usm.my](mailto:vc@usm.my)

[Terms & Conditions](#)