

'Let the wide world be our teacher'

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Comment

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WHAT is unique about the Higher Education Minister's 2010 Annual Address last week was the creation of the Liga Bola Sepak Institut Pengajian Tinggi (IPT) or the Higher Education Institutions Football League. Coming within a month of Malaysia's gold medal in the recent SEA Games, the initiative shows the timely support by the ministry to continue with the winning streak.

It took two decades to bring back the SEA Games football glory. This new move can only mean that our hope to retain the position would be better the next time around.

How so?



National coach Allan Harris (standing, second from right) giving instructions before the SEA Games football team train at Hoa Lu Stadium in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam in 2003.

The recent success is enabled through selecting from a small pool of talent; imagine the possible outcome when the League is in full swing!

This is the most direct and visible outcome of this new and refreshing programme. There would be many others, if we are not so hung up about winning and just grabbing medals which seem to be the preoccupation at times.

For starters, rarely any serious suggestion on raising the level of a national sport ever gets mentioned in a New Year speech at an academic institution.

Secondly, Liga Bola Sepak IPT gels well with several themes explored by the Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Khaled Nordin.

One is "collegiality" in the journey towards excellence.

This includes sharing of experiences, expertise and also collaboration without denying that competition can be a healthy practice.

These are important ingredients to nurture through sports as well as work and study.

Moreover, some attitudes can only be learned through practise, and not in lecture halls and textbooks.

Most of them are so essential in today's world that champions diversity, teamwork, tolerance, ethics and professionalism.

This take us to another point raised by the Minister, namely acquisition of "soft skills".

Fortunately, this time around the element of ambiguity has been removed by the introduction of the Malaysian Soft Skills Scale (My3S).

It encompasses the instrument to "measure" the level of acquisition of the desired soft skills at tertiary level.

My3S allows students to do a self-test online for their own developmental use.

This is yet another positive effort in removing vagueness from the word "soft skills" and determining what is

needed to work on them.

No doubt My3S can also leverage the potential of footballers!

Thirdly, is the question of "autonomy" that has now been given a new lease of life after the amendment to the Universities and University Colleges Act, 1971.

Team sports such as football is a good case to illustrate the importance of autonomy if goals are to be scored.

It is not a coincidence that among the world's best team autonomy is practised to the fullest.

This is to enable tactics and strategies to be devised to meet the challenges of the situation. It also allows players to be even more flexible to make quick tactical changes as and when the situation demands.

One cannot expect a football team to score a goal, let alone win, if it is micro-managed or given more rules than necessary to get a good game going!

Another point is the flexibility to hire-and-fire the much needed talent through enhanced mobility.

Indeed, universities are increasingly being run along the lines of a football club (sad though it is) where talents are hired, retained and rewarded like soccer celebrities in order to meet specific vision and goals!

Perhaps this has been part of our problems for a long time where teams (and universities) are tied down and shackled by all sorts of rulings (some unwritten ones).

In other words, the level of independence and the required soft skills (including accountability) to make and sustain a good winning team are almost absent.

A cursory reading of why we won in Laos indicate that the "autonomy" present harnessed the creativity of the team.

In the same way, an injection of autonomy in higher education, generally, and universities, in particular, must come sooner!

Overall, the address is refreshing because it now opens up the spheres of higher education beyond what is conventionally understood as "excellence" in the Malaysian context.

Higher education is about creating well-rounded personalities that cut across intellectual boundaries.

And this is interestingly implied in the last line of pantun enam kerat recited at the end of the address: Alam terkembang jadikan guru (Let the wide world be our teacher).

There is no better way to summarise what higher education is all about!

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