

The many faces of 'one'

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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THE figure "one" has always been a fascination to almost everyone (no pun intended). Even from an early age, we are inculcated with the value that "one" is somehow the best.

Being number one, for example, is highly valued, unique, and in many ways associated with some form of success, especially in aspects of competitions, which is today's jargon.

This is, perhaps, because one, as a unit of "measure" in the pecking order, is the most simple to understand.

In a community or organisation which is deeply hierarchical and elitist, to be number one is everyone's dream since it is synonymous with being endowed with power, real or perceived.

The "power" equation makes "one" even more in demand. Some would kill, literally, to get there.

In contrast, to have only "one" as a form of quantum has a different connotation. Thus, to have just "one" unit of a material thing, especially in a world of plenty, could be embarrassing to some. So we prefer to talk about multiples: multi-this and that.

A millionaire is dwarfed by the multi-millionaire; even when he/she is equivalent to a billionaire, one would prefer to be a multi-billionaire. And the cycle continues, into the trillions and so on.

Symbolically, this is because the desire to occupy the top place, yes, the number one position.

So we read all the time, the ranking of the world's richest person; sometimes further subdivided so that someone else also has a chance to be number one, albeit in a lower hierarchy. As long as one has "made it" somewhere, the ego is satisfied.

And because ranking has become a preoccupation as an indicator of "success", the substance is not relevant any more.

Among those who devise the ranking, the "power" to rank is the driving force, what more if along the way it creates multiple material wealth and publicity too.

To the simple-minded, this is often very important as they are convinced that everything can be counted and only those that can be counted count. Hence, we have a plethora of ranking activities, each with its following, although there are more and more people who are critical about it.

One of them, perhaps, the genius Albert Einstein, when he was quoted as saying: "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

Maybe Einstein, being the person he was and being ranked highly in any case, understood what this was all about. His statement was intellectually honest when he made the assessment, without having to sound like a case of "sour grapes".

More recently, during the meeting of the European Ministers of Education to consider the advances in the Bologna Process (as mentioned in last week's column), it was made known during the official dinner that the group was not subscribing to the notion of ranking.

Allegedly, they reckoned that education, complex as it is, deserves to be assessed better in a way that it takes into consideration the inherent values of diversity that would make education what it is. This automatically makes ranking totally irrelevant.

It is, indeed, a very bold, refreshing and enlightened viewpoint from a region that is highly conscious of the value of education as a vital agenda that must not be distracted by simplistic and, at times, intellectually dishonest attempts to rank.

That the Bologna Process itself took a decade to evolve, with the participation of the ministers, amply indicates how complex it is to create a credible European Higher Education Area, aimed at providing a broad, high quality knowledge base.

In other words, it is beyond just the immediate goal of stacking one university over the other; instead, it aims to comprehensively target the creation of a more peaceful, stable and tolerant European and global community. This, however, is not to say that there are no European universities that are among the best in the world today,

and more in future.

What Europe has done is to take "one" to another lofty level. In this case, it is about being a "unit" as in the European Higher Education Area. "One" in the sense of creating higher values of being more peaceful, stable and tolerant – the very fundamental of education that we have wholly missed in the pursuit of more simplistic notion of "one".

But, then again, it depends on how enlightened we are on the true meaning and purpose of education. Through the APEX agenda, this is one transformation that we are aiming at, in the context of 1Malaysia - which is, hopefully, not just about crunching numbers, at the expense of a more peaceful, stable and tolerant Malaysia, if not Asia.

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

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