

Returning our education to learning

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Comment

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EMPLOYABILITY, employability, employability. This has been the chant that is repeated annually when it comes to determining how successful the education system is.

It is largely led by the marketplace which over time has come to be the driver of education while the educationists slowly recede into the background and abdicate their academic leadership.

Backed by short-sighted politicians, the marketplace is emboldened to demand even more tailored-made courses that must grease the industrial cogs and wheels.

The ultimatum—either be "marketable" or be condemned as "irrelevant". Overnight, the purposes of education are fixated on "earning" rather than "learning".

Diplomas are reduced to a paper chase for the purpose of seeking jobs as dictated by the market. Otherwise, they are quickly labelled as "unemployable" and "incompetent". Then the blame-game begins, with the marketplace always right.

As a result of this, institutions of education are pushed to the corner as being irresponsible for not dancing to the tune of the marketplace, as though that is all that matters in education. Often times, the state seems to agree, adding more pressure to the already skewed situation.

This is at least what we have seen and experienced for almost a decade now. The bosses of the marketplace are calling the shots, blessed by myopic politicians.

But now, when the same bosses have lost their "venom" and are no longer in command amid the economic doldrums, we begin to see a totally different picture.

The chant has suddenly changed. It's no longer about employability, or even employment; it is about layoffs and shutdowns. The high and mighty marketplace is forced to dismount to the level of being virtually beggars. The bosses now are openly asking for handouts, almost shamelessly, even though it means sucking the poor taxpayer dry.

For a change, the tables are turned against them and many have to join the rank of the unemployed. Some are already redundant as their unethical behaviour has been exposed in full view by the economic crunch that they invented.

The cover of the prestigious business magazine, Fortune (Jan 19) was even more direct when it splashed the headline: "They took your money. They wrecked the economy. Now it's payback time."

As further remarked by media mogul Rupert Murdoch at the 2009 World Economic Forum in Davos: "We've been living in the Western world way above our means. We've been on a great binge and it's come to an end and we have to live through the correction."

Again: "The great majority of the people in the world are depressed and traumatised by the fact that their savings, the wealth in their homes or pension funds... a big percentage of it has disappeared."

Alongside, so too is the mantra of "employability". To be clear, at this stage, "employability" is a fallacy promoted by the marketplace in the name of self-interest.

It is a relative term coined to support what Murdoch implied as the "binge"—this time for the marketplace and their bosses. If not, how else can we explain the widespread layoffs while the bosses are insisting on their fat bonuses despite the shrinking financial bottomlines.

Others have even resorted to various mind-boggling unethical manoeuvres, such as one US financial adviser who reportedly faked his own death in a private plane crash to evade arrest for his supposedly crooked dealings.

Amid all this madness, fortunately, there is a voice of reason. Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin was quoted as saying: "Universities are under no obligation to provide industrial training. Their aim is to dispense knowledge."

He went on to talk about internship programmes with partner industry and courses in community colleges. This sobering statement must set the record straight, namely, the marketplace cannot absolve its responsibility to

provide for training regardless of the state of economy, if "employability" is the utmost concern.

In fact, this used to be the case when the number of educational institutions were fewer and the economy vibrant not too long ago. Practically everyone was grabbed by the same marketplace; employability was never an issue.

It must be understood that whereas the industry has the luxury to unilaterally declare a reduction in the number of jobs, this is not the case for public universities. While the industry can arbitrarily reset the definition of "employability", the universities cannot operate arbitrarily.

It looks like the game called "employability", as defined by the marketplace, is over. The marketplace has to be an equal partner for the sake of a larger interest.

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