

Learning the lessons of life well to succeed

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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BY now, most of the new students joining Malaysian universities must have settled down. Orientation would be over and the sooner one adjusts to the new lifestyle, the better.

Much of what the students do will shape the image of the university and higher education. More often than not, this would translate into academic performance. While this is not entirely wrong, it is also not the best way to characterise a successful tertiary education.

In other words, the university must be the place to discover and realise one's potentials and dreams. This should encompass not only the academic aspects but, equally important, the socio-cultural dimensions.

It is not good enough to remain just a bookworm or in a narrow confine of discipline without building up any interests in other inter-related fields.

Apart from this, efforts must be made to participate in co-curricular activities aimed at sensitising students to various issues away from the confines of the lecture halls. These activities are in no way inferior to the academic ones though they often steal the limelight, reinforced by our skewed understanding of what tertiary education means.

The Raja Muda of Perak recently emphasised the importance of other non-academic talents and we must fully endorse his view.

At this juncture, it is useful to reflect on what J.K. Rowling, of Harry Potter fame, said in her acceptance speech during the 357th Commencement of Harvard University. With her books selling more than 375 million copies, and having been translated into more than 65 languages and available in more than 200 countries, Rowling must have done something right to appeal to the newer generation. In her address, she underscored at least two crucial messages.

First, the importance of imagination, stating: "We do not need magic to transform our world." Instead: "We carry all the power we need inside ourselves already; we have the power to imagine better."

Unfortunately, according to Rowling, many prefer not to exercise their imagination. "They choose to remain comfortably within the bounds of their own experience, never troubling to wonder how it would feel to have been born other than they are.

"They can refuse to hear screams or to peer inside cages; they can close their minds and hearts to any suffering that does not touch them personally; they can refuse to know."

In other words, they are missing many other learning opportunities within their grasp and face the risks of being stale or even redundant.

Next, she spoke about the benefits of failure, which to her meant a stripping away of the inessential. In her own words: "I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena I believed I truly belonged."

Few realise that her debut novel was rejected by many publishers before being accepted for publication in 1996. In the next decade, between 1997 and 2007, seven Harry Potter novels were published, some among the most popular in history.

Hence, recounting her own failures and the pain that goes with it, she admitted that while they were not "fun", still some failure in life is inevitable.

It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all.

Rowling was set free because her greatest fear had already been realised, and that became the solid foundation on which she rebuilt her life.

"Failure gave me an inner security that I had never attained by passing examinations. Failure taught me things about myself that I could have learned no other way.

"I discovered I had a strong will, and more discipline than I had suspected; I also found out I had friends whose

value was truly above rubies."

Take home messages: "Imagination is more important than knowledge " and "anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new", both as testified by Einstein!

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