

Bureaucracy in education

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Article

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THE recent Global Competitiveness Report (GCR) 2005 released by the World Economic Forum ranks Malaysia rather well.

Malaysia was placed 24th in growth-competitiveness among 117 nations, up seven places from the previous ranking.

This is in contrast to an earlier ranking by The Institute for Management Development's World Competitiveness Yearbook 2005, where Malaysia was placed about half-way among 60 countries.

More specifically, the GCR 2005 ranking puts Malaysia's spending as the second-least wasteful country after Singapore, whereas Finland was 10th, United States 20th and Japan 68th.

This is consistent with the 2006 Budget emphasis in advocating a more prudent general spending so that Malaysia can secure a better position in future rankings.

While the GCR 2005 reported many other encouraging developments, in comparison to the developed economies, right now what should concern us is what ought to be done to improve Malaysia's competitive edge.

In this regard, what is most outstanding is the much-talked-about weaknesses in the overall delivery system.

For example, Malaysia was placed 80th for centralised economic policy-making, and, more embarrassingly, 101st for red tape.

Reportedly, the situation is marred by findings such as poor work ethics, ineptitude, graft and corruption, areas where the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Abdullah Badawi has repeatedly called for immediate action and improvement across the board.

Thus it comes as no surprise when Tan Sri Murad Mohd Noor, the former director-general of Education and an eminent educationist, expressed similar sentiments in the education sector.

His views were headlined "Overly bureaucratic education system" in the New Straits Times (Sept 27).

During a public lecture organised by the Ministry of Higher Education recently, he pointed out that the many notable changes to the education system, did not address the bureaucratic and examination-oriented culture.

He called for the implementation of a more comprehensive approach including "empowering" teachers and allowing them to "partner" with students in gaining knowledge.

This means a major overhaul, one that resonances well with the Prime Minister's call for "nothing less than an education revolution", and more recently, his assurance that Malaysia's higher education is set for a major policy review (NST, Sept. 27).

The Prime Minister was referring to the report of an independent higher education committee, headed by former education director-general Tan Sri Wan Zahid Noordin, to review the direction of higher education in Malaysia.

The committee's findings and recommendations have been presented to the Ministry of Higher Education in July.

Given such development, the Prime Minister expressed the hope that "a more defined and focused set of policies for higher education sector in Malaysia can be developed and soon put in place".

He is insistent that Malaysia must pursue certain strategies and policy directions for it to become a regional centre for excellence.

He is also confident that Malaysia's public higher education sector has the potential to flourish, particularly in post-graduate education.

As to what exactly the potential which could be made to flourish depends a great deal on what the committee's report has to say.

The report contains viewpoints and inputs of Malaysians from all walks of life.

In a sense, it is a public document that represents the concern of Malaysians anxious to see major changes in higher education.

But until the public can access the committee's findings and recommendations, we cannot be too far off in reiterating the concern made by Murad, namely to move away from "facilities-centred" approach and mentalities.

To be sure, at least from the higher education perspective, the sector has been growing by leaps and bounds in line with the Government's aspiration to create a knowledge-based economy.

And ultimately making Malaysia a developed nation using knowledge as its engine of growth.

While 1960 statistics showed only a handful of tertiary colleges and one public university, today there are hundreds of colleges and scores of universities and university colleges given the active involvement of the private sector.

Undoubtedly, this is a clear testimony of the commitment by the Government and backed by a consistently high and generous annual budget for education.

Unfortunately though, this is not enough to revolutionise the education system.

Seemingly, at the very least this is because "we are frozen in the way we think, we are overly bureaucratic", reasoned Murad.

While the physical establishment of institutions of higher learning continues to accommodate the ever-expanding need for tertiary education, it somehow does not exploit the potential of a university and higher education to the fullest.

Institutions of higher learning must be imbued with uncompromising excellence, encompassing the culture of not just doing things right, but equally important doing the right things as well.

This in turn depends on a clear worldview and model of what a university and higher education is based on international accepted norms.

Here is where Malaysia is at crossroad.

For example, is a university the same as a Fortune 500 company, though arguably some aspects of "business" are unavoidable today?

Or it is a political outpost, to the extent it can undermine academic excellence and integrity.

Or it is a bulwark of bureaucracy and conservatism in defiance of the rapidly changing k-world?

Unless these are looked into, higher education will continue to be plagued with conflicting roles and expectations, resulting in mediocrity.

Hence, like the Prime Minister we place high hopes that the committee's findings and recommendations will command serious and urgent considerations as inputs for revolutionary changes in higher education.

Hopefully this time, as Murad had said, we are not frozen in the way we think, and are not overly bureaucratic.

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