

Sometimes, it doesn't figure

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THERE is a popular saying among statisticians which goes like this: Lies, damned lies and statistics!

It may sound weird coming from statisticians themselves, but it is a recognition that statistics are not to be relied upon completely. There are too many things that can be buried under statistics. Ask any statistician.

So it was a great relief to read a clarification in the Dewan Rakyat last week on reports that 80,000 graduates were unemployed.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Mustapa Mohamed has put the record straight, though to some extent the damage has already been done. As expected, it all boiled down to how the statistics are compiled or constructed.

In this case, it was a simple case of (mis)understanding of what the category "graduate" stands for.

This normally refers to a first or basic degree (as distinct from a post-graduate degree which hopefully is not part of the statistics).

Apparently, what started the confusion was when the certificate and diploma holders were lumped into the same category.

Not surprisingly, therefore, we saw a highly inflated and alarming figure of 80,000. In contrast, the figures bandied about the last time around were about half of this.



NOT CHOOSY: Yunus Yusof, 45, checking on an oil palm in his Ladang Sawira estate at Muadzam Shah, near Rompin, Pahang. Yunus, who holds a Universiti Putra Malaysia degree in agriculture sciences, ventured into agriculture with 11 other graduates in a programme known as 'graduate farmers'. — Bernama file picture

How deceiving statistics can be was adequately illustrated by the clarification made in Parliament. We are told that "the figures will also be different depending on the source" — whether it is the Labour Exchange, the Statistics Department or the universities' tracer studies.

Of late, another figure of "some 18,000" was also mentioned (NST, April 9).

This is not all. The method of collection, the assumptions made, the criteria of categories involved are among the crucial factors involved. All these must be carefully explained if statistics are to be meaningful and used constructively.

Now that we know that more than 50,000 of the unemployed are certificate and diploma holders (assuming these are not at the postgraduate levels), rightfully they should be classed as non-graduates.

This leaves a figure of less than 30,000 "real" graduates who are unemployed — not too far off from the previous figure.

It looks further palatable, given that the sampling was done just after the convocations of many universities.

The current global economic situation will impact at least indirectly on industries' capacity to train or employ people.

Interestingly enough, except for one of the nine challenges in Vision 2020 that relates to the economy per se, all of the over-arching principles emphasise a broad world view of what education should be. So why the fuss over supplying the manpower needs of the industries alone?

The term "graduate unemployment" was virtually a non-issue when the economy was booming a few years back.

Employers, especially the industries, grabbed practically every graduate they could lay their hands on, ironically from much the same universities that now stand accused of producing "non-employable graduates".

The difference seems to be that employers then were more resourceful in value-adding or even "tailor-making" training programmes for graduates to suit their needs.

Today, by a sleight of hand this job is conveniently passed on to the universities, putting many of them in a spot. As a result, the idea, role and world view of a university in Malaysia has become vague and blurred, if not devalued.

But then, based on past experiences, universities (and recently schools too) are convenient scapegoats when things go wrong — be it politically, economically or socially.

This is because the universities (and schools) have been "tamed" not to question too much, less still to offer different opinions, even if they strongly sense that they have been unfairly accused and demonstrably so.

The unemployment figures are just a case in point and have created a lot of unhappiness among the university communities.

Like good punching bags, universities have learnt to absorb whatever comes although it means jeopardising lofty goals, such as turning Malaysia into an important educational hub, through unwarranted bad Press.

And yet when Malaysia is perceived as not meeting such goals, guess what?

Yes, university-bashing will start all over again and maybe another set of statistics will be released sans verification.

A classic example is of course the use of English as a second language of communication, which is seemingly an end and be all problem of unemployment.

Here, the students (implicitly the national schools and universities) are again at the receiving end.

We seem to forget that three decades ago, the schools and universities faithfully followed instructions and went through a difficult period of transforming the medium of instruction, although many were content with the use of English.

Consequently, Malaysians have become competent in the national language.

Suddenly, it has been perceived as a problem.

This time, the blame is heaped on students for being relatively poor English speakers, through no fault of theirs.

And, there is little interest in articulating the root causes or the real issues. The solutions offered remain ad hoc, and thus the slide continues.

What the statistics expose is interesting but what they hide is vital.

This seems to sum up our situation where we just harp on what we are exposed to, but fail to fathom the more illusive "vital" points.

This is especially so when universities are treated merely as punching bags, rather than as a site of intellectual dissent.

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