

Moving beyond mere exams to build up character

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Article

New Sunday Times - 03/06/2005

The suggestion made by the Ministry of Higher Education to include co-curricular contribution as part of the coming university intake appears to have received support all around.

Many reasoned that this is a timely move given that Malaysia needs a new generation of "education" citizens as we move closer to 2020.

For too long, Malaysia has been measuring success based on a rigidly exam-oriented system.

Though no doubt there have been a number of achievements that we can be proud of, the question is at what expense?

For instance, how about our performance in sports, our social etiquette, moral and ethical standards and other socio-cultural indicators?

Of late, these have been hogging the headlines almost daily, raising grave concern across the nation.

We may have produced academically excellent students. This is great except that many are still square pegs in round holes.

And hence, the seemingly endless socio-cultural annoyance, especially from among youth of school-going age.

One is tempted thus to conclude that education based strictly on examinations is no longer relevant to the future.

This is evident from comments made by Rosenberg in her book, *Cloning Silicon Calley* (2002), taking into account the sterling performance of Asian students in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS): "The rankings have provided little cheer."

In the view of policy-makers and business leaders, intellectual curiosity and creativity are not taught and are being stymied precisely because schools devote so much time to cramming their students with facts and skills through rote-learning.

Allegedly, there seems to be a mismatch between measurable academic achievement and the level of creativity among Asians.

In 2000, the Economic Creativity Index of Asian countries remained consistently lower than that of their European and American counterparts, despite the high placings in TIMSS.

Hence, by giving due recognition to co-curricular and similar activities, an important start has been made towards a meaningful educational change.

To know which way to go, let us consider what Cecil Rhodes, the founder of the oldest international and prestigious fellowship, regards as the benchmark.

To qualify for the Rhodes fellowship, he stipulated four qualities, (www.mercer.edu/nfs/RhodesScholarship.htm) and only one relates to "literary and scholastic attainments".

The other three seem to be "soft" and generally non-examinable qualities.

They are the energy to use one's talents to the full, as exemplified by fondness for and success in sports: truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak., kindness, unselfishness and fellowship; moral force of character and instincts to lead, and to take an interest in one's fellow beings.

Yet all are qualities that we need to have in making our 2020 Vision a reality, as spelt out in the nine challenges.

The question that begs to be answered is, could all such qualities be achieved through a strict examination-based education system such as ours?

Or should we not move beyond exams and incorporate other "softer" measures that can significantly contribute towards the intellectual development of character, courage, compassion, talent (read: a towering personality)?

If we should, then kudos to the ministry for initiating this much needed change - maybe as the first of many steps that would culminate in what the Prime Minister terms as the "education revolution".

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