

# Planning ahead for higher education

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Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister speaking on Coordination of Higher Education at the second Tun (Dr) Ismail Oration, Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

IMPERIALISM is not dead. It is very much alive. However its form has changed. It is no longer manifested as territorial acquisition and colonial rule by powerful nations.

It now manifests itself as large and spreading establishments in the commercial as well as the public administrative fields, presided over by individuals with a thirst for power comparable at times to the emperors of bygone days.

The multi-nationals in the commercial field and the intelligence agencies or state department in the administrative field are typical examples of latter day imperialists.

On a much smaller scale, but still recognisably imperialistic, are the government departments, statutory bodies and of course the institutions of higher learning which form the subject of this talk.

Institutions of higher learning expand at times, but positively not always, according to a variation of Parkinson's Law.

The possibilities for application of this law in universities in particular are almost unlimited. All kinds of work get thought up to occupy the time of academics — or at least that is the impression that a mere lay administrator like me gets.

For example a university is set up with a number of faculties. Like the primitive amoeba, the faculties then divide up according to schools or subjects or research projects or post-graduate studies. These subdivisions of the faculties grow and may eventually become faculties themselves or may subdivide and possibly divide again and again. Some of these faculties may grow into separate universities or they may

dissatisfaction.

Under dynamic leadership they prosper and become aggressive. But invariably they feel that they are not getting the support of the powers-that-be for their expansion programmes, whatever that may be.

This feeling of being neglected increases in inverse proportion to this dynamism. Funds are never enough and no one, it seems, is willing to attend to their needs. A brave battle is put up but eventually a favourite university disease overcomes them. They become "frustrated" or in their own jargon they "frust."

It is well that at this stage I explain the nature of this disease. It is a kind of depressive condition that has become very widespread among intellectuals.

Basically it is a type of self-pity generated by a feeling of being misunderstood and unappreciated. This feeling is nursed from the time when the feeling first stirred the heart until it overcomes or overshadows all other feelings.

Nothing happens that does not add to this disease called "frust". If requests are not met, frust increases. If met, frust would still continue because of some cuts or delays. If met, fully and in time some reason must emerge which ensures continued frust.

The disease is pervasive and infects as well as affects everyone. In the atmosphere that prevails, work and working relations with colleagues become strained. Teams do not form up under such conditions.

Bunting and Best under this condition would never come together. They would tear at each other, and in the process they would achieve nothing.

An undercurrent of

fort that sometimes one wishes that universities would revert to the proverbial ivory towers; detached, unconcerned and totally removed from realities.

In Malaysia, we have five universities and a few other institutions of tertiary education. Considering that other countries have tens or even hundreds of universities and institutions, the number we have is insignificant and should not really be a source of problems.

But universities and institutions of higher learning are not people and run by the average type. They are run by people whose intellectual abilities are what put them there; and these abilities are not only well above average; they are highly developed and highly specialised.

They are not going to be easily intimidated by power or put off by specious arguments. Hence the problem of coordinating higher education is a complex, delicate and onerous one.

In some countries separate ministries deal with ordinary level education and higher education. This separation permits the Minister concerned to apply sufficient time and concentration on each area.

Attention to details, which at times is necessary, would be possible with this separation. Contact with individuals from the academic world as well as administrators would enable better cooperation and possibly effectiveness of implementation of various plans.

However, this separation can result in lack of relevance and coordination between primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. It is entirely possible to have primary and secondary schools producing stu-

domic activities, the manpower for this switch must be trained very early.

Indeed the emphasis on science and technology which is the national war-cry now means that primary and secondary school syllabi as well as university and technical college courses have to be revised and implemented accordingly.

Primary and secondary schooling alone take eleven to thirteen years. This means educational planning that looks forward at least eleven years ahead.

But educational innovation does not begin with the preparation and implementation of a suitable syllabus. The teachers for any new syllabus will have to be produced first. This could add another two years at least — i.e. if we can train everyone of the teachers we need at one go to meet the requirement of the new policy. The likelihood is remote.

Mathematically speaking, the switch in policy would require 11-15 years of educational preparation. But can a country like Malaysia wait 11-15 years before achieving its goal?

The need for modernisation and industrialisation is evident now. What the situation would be like in 15 years is anybody's guess.

When we launched our Second Malaysia Plan for example we did not foresee the oil crisis nor could we be certain what the economic position would be like in 15 years' time. Would the need for technicians and scientists in 1990 be as planned by us now?

Obviously some telescoping of programmes must be devised. If the nation is to modernise and industrialise then there must be changes at all levels and stages almost simultaneously.

The emphasis on science and technology must be shown at primary, secondary and tertiary level not in nicely arranged time sequences but in a coordinated series of interlocking changes.

Comparatively spea-

they have their own ideas about how the changes are to be brought about.

Worse still, if there are five universities, there probably would be five different approaches and attitudes. It is like having the educational chariot pulled by five horses in five different directions.

The most likely result would be a break-up with bits and pieces of the disintegrated chariot flying in all directions.

What happens to the men in the chariot is of little consequence after that.

In order that some substantive results emerge from educational planning, it is obviously necessary to co-ordinate the development of university expansion.

On paper this is delightfully easy. Each university is allocated a specific job and it then goes on to implementing the set task it has been given. This picture is made even more clear-cut and simple by the emergence of late of the single-discipline university in this country.

Thus obviously the University of Agriculture would concentrate almost literally on the agricultural field. The University of Technology on the technological field. The Science University on the sciences etc.

Unfortunately nothing in this world is clear-cut. Somewhere a line has to be drawn to separate one thing from another. It is where the lines are to be drawn that problems emerge. Grey areas seem to abound wherever we try to establish borders.

Thus when defining the areas of expansion for the Science University and the University of Technology we are confronted with the very obvious question of the definition of science and technology.

These two words have a fondness for coming together. Thus we talk of the advancement of science and technology as if they are clearly defined separate entities. But we

grow in size comparable to the parent university.

The subdivision and growth is not merely on an intellectual plane but is actual and physical. Staff, buildings, equipment, real estate and budget grow along with the growth of the learned endeavours.

Soon the extremities of the complex disappear from the view of the centre. Being out of sight they are frequently out of mind as well.

Depending on the individuals actually running these extremities prosper, stagnate or wither away. Irrespective of whether they prosper, stagnate or wither, they seldom fail to become centres of conflict and

tension, bitterness and sometimes downright evil would suffuse these sub-centres of learning in the universities. Off and on they would boil over and the bickering and in-fighting would surface in a most unscholarly fashion. Leaflets denouncing individuals and groups would flood the campus and the outside world.

All this that I recount happens everywhere of course. They are not a local phenomenon, they are world-wide. However it is what happens here that concerns people like me. In fact they weigh down on me and occupy so much of the Ministry's time and ef-

dents who are totally unsuited for university or any tertiary educational institution. This would create considerable problems and cause a great deal of wasted effort.

In Malaysia, for example we believe in forward planning.

A crucial factor in planning for the development of a country is manpower. Skilled and trained personnel cannot be conjured up overnight. They have to be trained over a period of years.

Thus when the country decided that the future lies in industrialisation and modernisation of eco-

king, it is easy to institute changes in curriculum and expansions in primary and secondary schools. These levels of education are directly under the control of the Ministry and normally submit to new policies.

There may be protests, of course, from the implementors — in this case the teachers. Every change in direction or emphasis means retraining and reorientation of teachers. No one likes to be dislocated either physically or mentally. But still the problems which arise are manageable.

But the universities are a different kettle of fish. They either do not take kindly to the proposed changes or if they do

know very well that the sciences gave birth to modern technology and that technology is concerned with the application of the sciences. These two disciplines are so inter-related and intertwined that separation is really impossible.

In practice, this ambiguity can only lead to confusion, some of which is possibly intentional.

University Vice-Chancellors thrive on this confusion. They will insist that a particular field is basically scientific or technological depending on where they happen to be.

Most of the time their interpretation is aimed at getting for themselves a given field of expansion. But sometimes

their interpretation is directed at rejecting a particular field in which they are not interested. It is quite possible for all the universities to claim that a certain field does not come within their area of responsibility.

Another reason for the existence of grey areas is the 19th Century partiality for the word science. Whereas prior to this science seemed to involve only chemistry, physics and biology and related studies of the make-up of nature, in the nineteenth century the term of science was applied also to politics and sociology. Thus we have political science and social science emerging as important scientific studies.

This makes the separation between a science university and other traditional universities concerned with the arts and humanities more dif-

ficult. What this means in terms of administration is that there is no such thing as a science university, or an agricultural university or a technological university or as for want of a better term, a general university.

Thus it is not only important to separate the various branches of the sciences, but it is not even possible to separate science from arts.

In the welter of confusion created by ambiguous terms and differing interpretations the monitoring of the expansion of universities becomes very nearly an impossible task.

The administrator is not that of an interpreter of words but an arbitrator of roles. The administrator must decide quite arbitrarily the areas of expansion for each university. Like it or not, the universities have to lump it.