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A liberal education to meet skilled labour needs

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THE worry is real. Almost everyone agrees that the relentless march towards industrialisation may falter in the near future largely because of a lack of qualified people.

It surprises many foreigners that with a population of almost 20 million, companies in Malaysia find it difficult to recruit a good engineer, a laboratory researcher, a chemist or just a scientist.

Employers find it easier to get an accountant, lawyer, a banker or a graphic designer and they can even afford to be "picky", given the numbers.

They discover only a tiny stream of these science graduands trickles out of the campuses.

Beside the fear of not being able to do well in science subjects, students opt for the Arts because of better-paying jobs on the market.

Universiti Malaya Education Faculty's Dr John Aru Phillips, the head of social sciences education department, said more students enter the Arts stream because that was where the better job offers were.

Newspaper advertisements are dominated by employers looking for graphic designers, accountants, sales manager, marketing manager or public relations consultants.

"Not scientists. Students are just playing it safe by adapting to the job market," Phillips said.

"The Arts stream allows more flexibility as it is not as specialised.

"The students are qualified to do different occupations which do not require a high degree of specialisation.

"Employers now resort to more on-the-job training unlike an engineering or technical occupation which requires a solid foundation," he added.

The market trend today requires people skilled in occupations that displace them as far as the traditional method of streaming goes.

For example, product designers or graphic designers do not have a place in the Science, Arts or Vocational streams.

Phillips argued that these people needed both the Arts and the Science subjects but were not allowed to get both which puts them at a disadvantage.

UM head of pedagogy and psychology education Dr Suradi Salim said the small number of students enrolling in the Science stream was a recurring trend of the early 1980s.

The Government then encouraged students to enrol in the Sciences.

After a few years, there was a glut of Science students and many were jobless after graduation.

Students were then encouraged to take up the Arts.

"We have to remember that this was before Malaysia was inspired to become an industrialised nation when our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, announced Vision 2020 in 1990," Suradi said.

Now the trend of not taking Science subjects has started again among secondary students and everybody is worried.

What discouraged the students is not unemployment after graduation but because job prospects for Science students are not transparent.

"An Applied Science student taking medicine, dentistry or engineering has relatively transparent job prospects," said Suradi.

"But students going for pure Science degrees aspiring to become chemists or researchers do not see the career opportunities.

"Job prospects for students in the Arts stream, Social Science or Business fields can see their career choices more clearly.

"Most of these jobs are readily available and students are more aware of their existence."

Suradi cited the example of an administrator, an Arts graduate, who because of the nature of his job deals with the public much of the time.

So, everybody knows what an administrator does but the job of a scientist or a researcher is not clear.

There is, thus, less glamour in what scientists do.

Phillips added that the reputation of Science as difficult and expensive also deterred students.

"Many say they would rather spend that money by investing in an accountancy or business course," he said.

Another educationist, Professor Chiam Heng Keng, with the UM education faculty, said the Arts stream allowed many to make lots of fast money.

"This is readily apparent in the business sector. Parents themselves feel that there is not enough money to be made in the Sciences."

Chiam mused that there was also not enough status gained from being a mere researcher or laboratory assistant.

How do these educationists feel about the Government's efforts to encourage more students to take up Science?

Suradi was optimistic but Phillips was skeptical. The former suggested the Government organised more vocational guidance programmes and strengthen existing ones.

Career guidance counsellors can inform students of the job prospects.

"The media also has a role to play in rekindling students' interest in Science by introducing Malaysian scientists and other innovators to them," he said.

Phillips said a few local universities were hit quite badly by the empty classrooms in the Science faculties.

"Students just do not see the reason for joining the Science stream when employers are looking for accountants, lawyers or computer analysts," he said.

He said the definition of Arts and Science streams needs a drastic change of definition.

"Our school curriculum is too rigid, and needs to be redefined while keeping in line with the current job market.

"The jobs which require creativity need to be kept in mind.

"For example, the increasing importance of journalism or broadcasting needs to be explored," said Phillips.

The current definition of an Arts or Science student also needed to be redefined, Phillips added.

"What our school system needs is a more general and liberal education where students are exposed to every possible subject."

The pressure on a child to decide at the age of 15 whether he wants to be a doctor or a lawyer is immense.

A child should be given the basic 11-year education and then allowed to gain exposure from both the Arts and the Science subjects at the secondary level.

"Countries like the United States do not have streaming and give students a broad foundation where they take up all subjects from chemistry to fine arts.

"There is no reason why we cannot give our students the same kind of exposure and freedom."

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