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Give teachers, lecturers more room for change

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I WOULD like to comment further on the subject of university lecturers and the Diploma in Education, which was the subject of an editorial in the New Straits Times of April 16.

Perhaps, first of all, the public should be made fully aware that a Diploma in Education programme in any existing university in the world is meant primarily to train school teachers.

I need hardly add that university lecturers are NOT school teachers and I would prefer also not to be called "teachers" for the simple reason that "teaching" is now a very misunderstood term, not just in Malaysia but in Asia as a whole, because of the propensity to link even the modern teacher to the traditional guru.

The guru prescribed; the pupils subscribed. The result has been that, for a very long time, it is the West that has been achieving significant breakthroughs in human knowledge because they dare to challenge accepted ideas.

But lately we ourselves are talking of "quantum leap" and "paradigm shift". How can we achieve these if our education system, especially at the tertiary level, continues to maintain the status quo?

There seems to be general agreement that lecturers should stimulate minds and help students see things in different perspectives. But students today do not express opinions nor even ask questions. Is it not evidence that something is very wrong?

The argument seems to be that by undergoing a course in Diploma in Education, the lecturers will acquire pedagogical skills which will help them to function more effectively and turn things around. But is the Diploma in Education (meant to train school teachers) the best means to achieve that objective?

If the intention is to achieve a shift in perspective and approach, is it not better that the university should from time to time invent ways (based on the experience of those who have long been associated with university education) of achieving that end?

Prof J. Ronayne, Vice-Chancellor of the Victoria University (Melbourne), was interviewed (NST, April 16) and he said that in many Australian universities, there was a voluntary programme which enabled lecturers to obtain a Diploma in higher education. He said that there was no opposition among the academics there to that programme. There would be none here too if a similar voluntary programme were introduced. And such a programme should rightly be led by very experienced persons who have proven academic track records in the university, not necessarily people with a Diploma in Education.

Education is a very serious matter. It is unfortunately quite intangible and, therefore, difficult to evaluate. It is undeniable that today we tend to judge success in education by examination results. Why do we not make an attempt to study what has happened to those who passed examinations with flying colours? How many of them form the main core of the country's leaders today in both the public and the private sectors?

In more advanced countries, there is now a preference for the term "facilitator" instead of "teacher" precisely because there is a need deliberately to shift people's perception. "Teaching" has acquired a meaning which is no longer acceptable. Indeed, a neighbouring country is already attempting to do away with what it calls a "teacher-led" education

system.

Both teachers/lecturers and students must be freed from the traditional fetters which restrict the role of the former to merely helping students pass examinations by giving them what is deemed to be the right answer to every question.

Our Prime Minister's call for Vision 2020 is not a mere slogan. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has himself made the first move. He is not a defender of the status quo. He is not satisfied with what we are and the present mode of doing things. He has dared to move in directions where previously Malaysians had been afraid to tread. His is the philosophy which should govern Malaysia's education system.

In the university, lecturers should be free to experiment, to discover, to depart from tradition, and to push beyond known frontiers. There should not be a pathological fear of making mistakes provided they learn from their mistakes. That is the spirit too that they should try to inculcate in their students. There is no particular way that they can achieve this. Students differ not only from year to year but also within a particular class. The lecturer cannot predict; he needs to study his students, and he will often be called upon to invent new approaches.

What is this thing called "pedagogical skill"? It is not like a car manual offering clinical instructions to help one handle a technical problem. Any attempt to establish a standard approach will likely flounder. "Science" is fine when it is applied to the study of material things; it is unrealistic when strictly applied to the understanding of human beings. The lecturer must have the freedom to adapt and adjust qualitatively. Not even a lecturer in education can dish out gospel truth when dealing with how students can be stimulated and capacitated to handle abstract problems.

It is instructive to note that an attempt to provide a different view on the subject of lecturers and the Diploma in Education has been construed as arrogance. It reveals all too clearly the frame of mind of many Malaysians. No wonder Malaysian students today are not only afraid to express opinions but also to ask questions.

It is amazing that lecturers who have spent years in the university are being told by many who have no concrete experience to speak of that they (the lecturers) do not know what they are talking about.

Of course we expect the Ministry of Education, from time to time, to invent schemes for improving Malaysia's education system. I am sure the Ministry too would like to have the response of all those (not just teachers/lecturers) who are concerned with education in this country. One should give credit to people who offer different views based on logic, philosophy and first-hand, up-to-date experience. Of what use are university lecturers who do not have views? Of what use is a university staffed by lecturers who do not ask questions and express opinions? How are they to help their students achieve the objectives of Vision 2020 which require Malaysians to attain the same level of intellectual and technological standing as those in the West?