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Time to come up with new ways of teaching

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AS a retired school teacher (acting principal) and a former Associate Professor (head of department) in the Education Faculty of Universiti Malaya, I wish to add my views to those expressed by Prof Datuk Khoo Kay Kim (NST, April 24).

His call for more room for change is expressive of the restlessness of the "educators" (a better word than "teachers" or "lecturers", perhaps) who are inspired by the vision of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "to move in directions where previously Malaysians had been afraid to tread", to quote Khoo.

It cannot but induce sadness that "an attempt to provide a different view on the subject of lecturers and the Diploma in Education has been construed as arrogance", to quote Khoo. Those who push for lecturers to acquire a Diploma in Education are perhaps mistaken in equating such a diploma with the ability to "lecture" in a university environment.

Khoo says that "teaching" is now a very misunderstood term. The same can be said of "lecturing" and this includes not only what lecturers do but also what professors do.

A university (and probably Smart schools as well) is not merely a "teaching" institution; it has many other roles. These include preparing professionals to attend to the needs and welfare of the citizenry, ensuring cultural transmission, inclusive of research and dissemination of knowledge and skills or, to use a fashionable term, the transfer of "technology" both theoretical and practical via training (the latter being another often misunderstood term).

The university should attract all scholars irrespective of whether they can "teach" or "lecture", or "profess" (whatever this word connotes). Some cannot "lecture" well but are excellent researchers or administrators. It is surely unfair to judge a scholar by a uniform standard. At one time "research" and "publications" were also very misunderstood terms.

Now it seems that the pendulum has swung the other way and "teaching" is being emphasised.

There is surely a niche for scholars in the many activities that such a body as a university undertakes for society.

Sad to say, some academics in positions of authority do not have the mission or vision to recognise the variety of such talents that can be harnessed to fulfil its social and academic objectives.

I remember talking to a University Hospital surgeon who was one of the only two always on call at the Emergency Ward and, as such, was obviously overworked and unable to conduct research or publish much. He was by-passed for promotion year after year. He showed me a letter of appointment to work in the United States and he said that if he was by-passed again, he would quit.

He seemed a genuine academic who did not think of making money in private hospitals. All he asked for was to tend to the injured and to "teach" in a university. He had been made to feel that he had no place in the university if he did not also do research and publish.

The unreflective aping of the Western "publish or perish" syndrome did not consider the availability of outside funding and the limited "teaching" by such lucky researchers who have teaching assistants.

There is a legitimate fear now that "researchers" who might have in the past escaped their fair share of "teaching" duties will now not be able to

focus on "research". The story of the surgeon is one out of the many that are common knowledge and yet we resist facing it squarely and often lament why there has been a "brain drain".

No doubt, like other professionals, an academic needs monetary rewards but one must not be belittled at interviews for promotions when one's forte lies in an area equally important to the university.

Contrary to Khoo's reservation on the use of the word "teaching", teaching is just the obverse of "learning". Without "teaching" (etymologically it means to "show" or "guide") - whether by example, experience (direct or vicarious), through wisdom of sages, religious inculcation, familial upbringing, and not forgetting "lessons" from educators and educationists - learning would have no foci. One would know things but would not really learn things. Teaching encompasses these aspects and more.

To "facilitate" (to "make easy" or "easier") is also to "guide" and is thus another way of saying to "teach". Since there is so much to "learn" from the Internet, the good and the bad, isn't there a place for educators to "direct" or "guide" young and old minds alike to focus on what is "good" in the context of our own culture and the manifest and latent destiny of our nation, a nation that is guided and directed by the vision of our PM and his Cabinet?

Thus to teach is to intervene in the learning process. Does any educator wish to abdicate this responsibility? It is for this reason that computers and other technologies of learning cannot replace the "teacher" qua educator.

I concur with Khoo that the Diploma in Education "is meant primarily to train school teachers" but that does not mean that it is not relevant to tertiary-level teachers (although academics would prefer not to be called "teachers"), albeit this course has a different focus. It is simply not suitable. What is required is for "master" teachers, that is professors and lecturers who "should be free to experiment, to discover, to depart from tradition, and to push beyond known frontiers", to quote Khoo, to pass on their wisdom to new recruits (even PhD holders).

Just as the law profession requires a Certificate of Legal Practice, there is surely merit in considering a Certificate of Academic Practice owing to the fact that for the foreseeable future we may be scraping the bottom of the barrel for academic staff to fill posts in universities and colleges, whether corporatised or private sector institutions.

I suggest each faculty, centre or department sets up its own "in-house training unit" in consultation with the Faculty of Education which keeps in touch with the evolving styles of using innovative technologies culled from global practices.

Such proficiency courses can be tailored for staff on probation. As for confirmed (tenured) staff, they should be allowed to decide voluntarily whether to upgrade their understanding of education, which many do because they are also parents. If they have to train their charges, there is no doubt that they would do so.

Each institution should also keep a roll of retired staff who could be co-opted to help in imparting this "pedagogical wisdom" to new staff through guest lectures, colloquiums, seminars, informal discussions, demonstrations and so on.

As Khoo rightly pointed out, "(the) lecturer cannot predict; he needs to study his students, and he will often be called upon to invent new approaches". However, to invent new approaches he may re-invent the wheel which is wasteful of energy and talent.

Would it not be better to learn from his predecessors or his seniors in service, or from educators who specialise in studying the pedagogy or

andragogy of a particular discipline within the university or college? The challenge of building Smart schools and excellent universities as we approach the year 2020 is to be bold enough to re-think how we are going to educate the young, and also those not so young beyond the school level, who thirst for knowledge and new ways of thinking and doing.

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