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Educational re-design vital

TWO matters of significant import pertaining to information technology were brought to the surface by both Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The move to replace certain traditional subjects in the country's education system is compelling as it is timely. According to Dr Mahathir, the rapid changes in information technology dictates this move since students must be equipped with the relevant know-how to meet the challenges of the Information Age.

The transition of the country's economic life to a globalised and information-based one requires the re-design of important systems, primarily the education system. Such a reconfiguration is imperative. It is worth remembering that the industrial era did lead to the reconfiguration of institutions left over from the mediaeval period such as schools and universities. Using this as a historic parallel, certain leftover institutions and methodology from industrialism are likely, nay, should devolve in miniature forms and ways that reflect the might and logic of micro-technology.

For the education system, this would entail discarding the system of rote-learning, an examination-based curriculum and some old disciplines. University syllabuses of some courses need to be revised and, in some cases, certain subjects dispensed with altogether. Surely, the instantaneous sharing of data everywhere and nowhere at once will change one's approach to learning. Starting with the primary level, our young need to be taught the attribute, which critics say has eluded many of our pupils, of critical thinking.

Herein lies the solution to Abdullah's concern over the negative side of the Internet such as the pervasive hate sites, pornography and the spread of lies. As he puts it, the societal transformation brought about by the Net and cyber economy will lead to some upheaval. The Information Revolution unleashes both the spirit of genius and nemesis. Changes in the education system where emphasis is placed on the development of critical thinking and the responsibility that comes with intellectual liberty plus the aid of software programmes which parents can install to block children's access to adult-only stuff will help to minimise any upheaval. Both young and old must open their minds to new ways, approaches and technologies.

This composite of open minds determines how open a society is and how far the Government, too, can adapt to a wired-environment which transcends locality and challenges the concept of a nation-state and diminishes national sovereignty. As Dr Mahathir indicates, the Government is prepared to make adjustments but its capacity to do so is dependent on the level of the people's understanding of and education on IT.

The Smart school project, if properly and speedily implemented, will ensure the birth of a discerning, knowledgeable and digital-savvy younger generation. But the lack of resources and trained teachers are stumbling blocks. The present IT subject is insufficient. The Education Ministry should see to it that the Smart school blueprint is closely adhered to by participating schools in the pilot programme. It should seek innovative ways to expedite and expand the project nationwide. If the red tape is cut, schools can form Smart partnerships with the private sector where companies can jointly adopt a school for the project since these youngsters will form the backbone of a digital Malaysia.

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