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Reality of needs

CAST a stone and it is likely to hit a number of people who are not trained specifically for the job they are doing. Given time, and the determination to learn more than the rudiments of the trade, they manage to arm themselves with certain skills and probably even excel.

This is the situation in which scores of university graduates have found themselves in the last twenty to thirty years, and it prevails still. That was when a degree in arts was almost a universal norm and the ratio of arts to science students was hopelessly lopsided in favour of the latter. It persists even today, though the ratio gap is less of a yawn.

Back then, Malaysia was an agriculture-based economy heavily reliant on commodities before it switched to manufacturing after the mid-eighties economic slowdown. The Government, in spearheading its strategies and policies towards an industrialisation process, is now pursuing a knowledge path in tune with the times.

However, as companies and countries position themselves in a bid to race ahead of others at the cutting edge of technology, it is those with the relevant skills and the right attitude who will make it to the peak. To survive and to stay ahead of the rat race, it is incumbent upon countries which want to stand up and be counted to train their people to meet the nation's manpower needs.

It is only natural to look to universities to fulfil such requirements as undergraduates are drilled not just in academia but to be thinking individuals as well.

In preparing themselves for the future, they have to be cognisant of the needs of the job market and opportunities available. If the scope is limited for the course they have chosen to pursue, then those entering the employment field will find they have to spend more time to acquire further skills if they wish to enhance their career prospects.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's word of caution on the need to prevent a mismatch between what is learnt and what is needed is a timely reminder. Indeed, those in the job market who are not gainfully employed or who are disenchanted with their job prospects spell potential danger for strategically designed development plans if they do nothing to nurse their dissatisfaction.

Far too often, students choose the courses they are interested in without thinking of the need to equip themselves with marketable skills. In an era of explosive knowledge and technology, it is a necessity to have more than a basic grasp of information technology and its applications to keep pace with development.

The motivation to excel in any course leading to a marketable field has to begin at an early age. It would be tough persuading a student on the threshold of adulthood and with a mind of his own to select an area of study about which he does not care two hoots.

At the risk of starting a raging debate on guiding and orientating children in their formative years to a potentially promising career path, it is a wise move to do so. The competition ahead professionally, as well as the premise of fulfilling a nation's needs, is good enough rationale.

Interest in areas close to the heart can always be pursued at a later stage, but equipping individuals with skills for a rewarding career is best done at tertiary level. Reality cannot be relegated to the back seat as there is a time for everything.

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