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Academia ageless, not time-bound

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IT is heartening that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said "the retirement age for civil servants will eventually be raised to sixty years" (NST, May 5). The existing privilege of working beyond 55 is enjoyed by a few, namely the Superscale Group, especially directors-general, secretaries-general, specialist teachers and lawyers, as reported.

While the term "civil servant" may be a misnomer, and indeed need to be redefined to distinguish a more privileged "few" from the general "mass"; the term itself seems not to stick well with some professions, especially for academicians, for a number of reasons.

First, a continuous formal learning process to keep up with science and technology development and global societal change, and to make amendments to curriculum outcomes of learning at schools and universities is of the greatest challenge at present. The problem of keeping up with the learning process at higher levels is the burden of the academicians, the "thought leaders" of society.

And this "higher challenge" is ageless and timeless. To crank this process to a dead stop at 55 years, or a little more, is to scuttle the continuous learning mode of universities as centres of academic excellence.

Even Al-Azhar, Oxford and Cambridge grew into prominence for hundreds of years. Thus, academia, and what it professes to mean, is ageless and not time-bound.

Secondly, it is universally accepted that universities are invested with a mission to effect changes to growth in the social, cultural and economic spheres of society. The potential, the energies, political/institutional supports and financial whereabouts are to be used strategically to engineer long-lasting benefits.

The need to understand, to plan and to effectuate new learning outcomes is a task only vaguely understood by the majority of decision makers. Thus academicians, are given the task to be "missionaries" too, no matter how problematic the circumstances may be.

Thus to attract the brains to this somewhat beleaguered profession with an effective package of remuneration would be nation-building.

The third argument is that any progressive society needs to understand learning is "serious business"; not a viable profitable business in the short run but a long term nation-building desirability.

Like an individual that works and grows professionally, organisations and society itself need to understand that skills, knowledge and capabilities demand change and financial investment of a sustained kind.

In more "learning" societies like the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States, a decade ago something like "Accreditation for Prior Learning" (APL) was introduced.

Under this assumption, every economically active person has sufficient learning ability afforded by on-the-job experience to contribute effectively to their employers and organisations if given sufficient chance.

APL is a tool, a format and portfolio whereby records of valuable learning experience is asked of the worker so that he or she is 'evaluated' on the merit of his or her own experience when considering promotion, job transfer or retraining.

The key words here are "experiential learning". It is more reliable and more effective than the current standard norm of preparing curriculum vitae or job profiles. In other words, the longer the work experience a person has the more points to be given to them when retraining exercises are carried out.

In their haste to get things done, organisations seldom come close enough to gather and discuss seriously how the experience and method of work is put to use by their workers. What is important is their accumulated "experiential learning". A mature worker is better than a green horn. Age and experience need not be a minus point at all.

In academia (with sufficient productivity), a person above fifty needs to be considered for a professorship considering the efforts and experience of over 25 years. Thus to retire a professor early is to cut one's nose to spite the face.

Many research and academic programmes (Masters and PhD) are generally sustained through the mentor and opinion leadership of senior members of the profession. There is indeed this hierarchy of ability and of intellectual leadership that is to be recognised and rewarded accordingly, so that confusion and politics do not hog long-term academic programmes.

Architects, conservationists, historians, tourism promoters, urban and economic planners have long been insistent about the lack of appreciation of the nation-building heritage, our lack of expertise in packaging our own socio-cultural products to the outside world. On our doorstep, in the universities, our lack of appreciation for the intellectual heritage, of our nation is dismally manifested daily.

Environmental scientists like to postulate that if we care to upgrade our physical infrastructure and facilities to a point where lecturers feel that greater sense of pride and love for learning within our universities, then the greater mission of upgrading our knowledge heritage will be kept aglow for a thousand years.

This is a simple, homegrown secret so that bright young men and women and talent can bring back academic success to the universities. What glows nowadays is the corporate offices, technology parks and other marketplace attractions.

Long gone are the vibrant crowds that accompanied distinguished lectures. What is left in today's crowd are silent bearers, uncritical learners and timid questioners, who barely understand what they are hearing.

A progressive learning society that is looking for a quantum leap to get that competitive edge in the global market place needs to look more to the universities and their potential.