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Education is key to nation's future

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I QUOTE Nelson Mandela who said that: "Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the President of a great nation."

For a man who spent 27 years in prison to liberate his country, he knows very well that it was finally his own education that led him to the position of South Africa's first black President. He clearly emphasises that it is "education" that will liberate the indigenous people of South Africa - not riots and violence, not politics, not land grabbing or even "genocide" as practised and encouraged by some other leaders.

For that reason, all Malaysians must applaud our leaders, who have from the early years since Independence (Merdeka) spent billions on education for Bumiputeras and other Malaysians. I am one such proud recipient of government funding for my education, for which I am forever grateful (Keragaman, Malaysia).

Thankfully, because of our leaders' wisdom, we are now tasting the fruits of a resolute policy of educating our people. Malaysia sent its sons and daughters to Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in the early years and it has since broadened its horizons to include non-English speaking nations like Japan and Russia.

Language, culture and distance are not a barrier for our people as we reach out across the globe for education.

It is because of this open policy that we have now a core of educationists, professors, lecturers and teachers, Malaysians and expatriates, who now form the staff for our vibrant and growing string of local universities and colleges. Malaysia in fact, has become a centre for tertiary education in the region, receiving students from all over the world.

It is wonderful also to see a healthy mix of Malaysian professionals, doctors, lawyers, engineers, accountants, surveyors, dentists, pharmacists, professors, teachers and others from all races playing their role in developing our nation towards 2020.

Education is the heart and soul of a developing nation. It is the very framework of a developed society. Remove its human resource from the infrastructure, no matter how great and advanced, and you are left with an empty shell - a "ghost" city or nation.

A rich nation, blessed with huge resources and wealth is nothing without an educated people. Once its foreign expatriates and workforce leave, it goes back to zero, leaving behind hi-tech equipment that no one is trained to handle and which quickly breaks down or becomes obsolete.

Such a country is worse off than even an undeveloped agriculture-based nation, whose citizens are still able to till the land and work with oxen to feed its people.

As we move into the era of information technology and K-economy, the role of knowledge and education in personal development will be even more important. Every Malaysian parent knows that, particularly in our country where the degree holder is rewarded with a much bigger income, compared to the blue-collar worker who struggles for a life-time.

That is why education is such an important matter. Whether we like it or not, it will always be "politicised" - whatever that means.

I am what I am because my country gave me the opportunity to pursue my dreams and achieve it. I wholeheartedly believe in and endorse the same spirit with which John F. Kennedy called his fellow countrymen in his inaugural presidential address of Jan 20, 1961 - "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country".

However, before any Malaysian can contribute effectively and meaningfully towards the nation's growth and development, he or she must receive education, experience and knowledge to equip and prepare him well in serving our beloved country.

I have no doubt that nearly all Malaysians will fully support that every student with excellent results should be rewarded with scholarships and the opportunity to pursue his or her studies.

Our Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in his book *The Malay Dilemma* mentioned about the two types of scholarships being awarded. The first is for the brilliant, i.e. based on merit and the second group, for the needy, for the equally vital role of social restructuring.

Thus, the issue of education cannot be closed by one statement or Press release and the last person in this country who should ever close discussions on education is the Minister of Education himself.

I suggest leaders should not avoid difficult questions and take a cue from educator and author of the 1930s, Alan Bloom.

"The liberally educated person is one who is able to resist the easy and preferred answers, not because he is obstinate but because he knows others worthy of consideration."

Let us continue to give Malaysians access to the best education in the world.