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Meritocracy in intake should begin with common university entrance exam

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MERIT. Meritocracy. Comparing an apple with an apple while everything remains the same - *ceteris paribus*. Simple to understand.

Yet today the term "meritocracy" confounds Malaysians.

When I took my STPM examination, university admission was based on the quota system. The "formulae" was not entirely fair to a young school leaver but we understood it as affirmative action.

It was necessary to right the historical wrongs and, more importantly, to tilt the field in favour of those less advantaged.

However, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad introduced meritocracy after critically examining our public university standards, many were excited about the concept as a tool to redeem our academic excellence.

In the Sixties, University of Malaya was acclaimed as a university of international repute. However, in 2000, it was ranked 47th out of 77 universities in Asiaweek's ranking of Best Universities in the region. Universiti Putra Malaysia was 52nd and Universiti Sains Malaysia 57th.

There were other surveys too, which ranked our universities even lower. So, meritocracy was timely.

Academic excellence can no longer be compromised. Malaysia needs meritocracy to thrive in the increasingly globalised world, and proper university selection will be the true litmus test of our education standards.

Of course, not all agree.

Generally, however, there was hope and belief that the proposed changes would boost our education system and our academic status in the world.

Today, two years into its implementation, something seems to have gone amiss.

Every day, deserving students are crying out that they did not gain admission to university. Every day, there are appeals to the Government, letters in the newspapers and memoranda through various organisations from students who did not qualify in spite of getting the maximum number of As.

Whatever happened to the Prime Minister's well-thought-out vision? Has the much idealised meritocracy become muddled in the process of implementation down the line?

One major problem that has been cited over and over again is that currently, there is no single assessment for the selection of students.

Instead there are three pre-university educational assessments: STPM, the matriculation programme and the Basic Science Centre (Pusat Asasi Sains) run by the University of Malaya.

The two-year STPM is well-tested, open and standardised while being affiliated with the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The STPM results are based on the final examination.

In comparison, the one-year matriculation, which follows the American system, is totally different. Evaluations are based not just on the final examination but also on attendance, assignment, and presentation with lecturers.

The matriculation students are mostly selected on the basis of ethnicity and not on merit entirely.

The fundamental principle of meritocracy collapses here.

I suppose this fact was overlooked when the Education Ministry claimed that the public university admission is based purely on merit?

Last year, former Universiti Sains Malaysia vice-chancellor Datuk Dr Ishak Tambi Kechik called for the replacement of all three systems with a single pre-university system.

And to support this, the Malaysian Academic Movement chairman, Dr Wan Manan Wan Muda, also asked for a standard examination so that students can compete on the same level.

In the United States, every school and every State has its own examination style. However, students have to sit for the Standard Assessment Test when applying for places in universities.

In Britain, too, they have the standard A level examinations.

Similarly, we could also avoid confusion and clear the air by having an entrance examination that is accepted by all.

This will ensure that the most deserving students get a place in public universities.

One more discrepancy is that students have been admitted to university via a twinning programme with the privately-run Perak College of Medicine (PCM).

Is the admission standard on par with that of the university central processing system?

Such variations in the admission methods are obviously visible to the public and when the Education Ministry maintains that there is merit, it leaves us somewhat confused.

If there are discrepancies in the method of administration, they should be sorted out. Until then, the alert and aware public cannot be expected to keep silent and accept the distortions as fair.

For instance, it baffles the public that the Education Ministry did not take into account the 10,650 places in Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Kolej-Universiti Islam Malaysia, the International Islamic University and various Islamic faculties when presenting the statistics on overall university admissions.

I believe that if we are serious about academic excellence, a transparent, intellectually, not emotionally defensible selection method has to be implemented.

Meritocracy in student intake should start with a common university entrance examination for the 17 public institutions of higher learning.

If a common examination is not possible, students - regardless of ethnicity - should be admitted to whichever pre-university course they want, including matriculation. Then there will be true meritocracy.

Nonetheless, if meritocracy cannot be fully implemented because we still need to continue with affirmative action plans, we will understand.

At least we will be less confused than now.