

**Raising the bar**  
**New Straits Times (Columns)**  
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AMONG the 3,000 attendees at the launch of the Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Putrajaya on Monday, there must certainly have been a forest of heads nodding in agreement throughout Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's address.

Who could deny either the need for such a comprehensive blueprint for the long-term refurbishment of higher education in this country, or the soundness of the objectives and strategies laid out therein? The quantitative aspects of tertiary education in Malaysia have been amply developed in the past 30 years.

From just half-a-dozen universities then to 23 now, with an even greater explosion in private tertiary colleges, together accounting for the higher education of nearly a million students today, the avenues to diplomas and degrees have been widened to an extent that could only have been a fond fantasy of educationists at the time of independence.

Yet, our Op-Ed page today carries a wistful comment by Universiti Malaya vice-chancellor Datuk Rafiah Salim, bemused by how today's greatly expanded curricula, as compared to her time as an undergraduate, seem not to have helped produce graduates of a comparable level of confidence, ability and readiness to face the world as in her time.

The technological and infrastructural development of higher education — more colleges, better equipped, with vastly expanded options in courses — has gone as far as it can. Hence, the inestimable value of the Strategic Plan. Coupled with the National Higher Education Action Plan announced earlier this month to cover the remaining years of the Ninth Malaysia Plan, these two documents constitute the National Education Blueprint promised last January as the road map to the quality education this country needs, for itself and the developing world.

The emphasis is now on quality: The merit of students and faculty alike, open competition, autonomous management and strict invigilation of instruction — even an hierarchy of institutions subtending from "apex" colleges to set the bar where it rightly belongs, and serve as benchmarks for the rest.

It won't be easy achieving such objectives after a generation of shovelling all-comers through the education mill, ending up with mediocre graduates who basically feed their disgruntlement into socio-political expression upon their emergence into a world with which they are ill-equipped to contend. Where there could be no argument is in the necessity of this approach, and in there being no deadline on its exercise.

As Abdullah has emphasised often of late, this is one road that goes on forever.

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