

Searching for a needle in a haystack

IN the final days leading up to the new year, I was asked, along with several other professors, to interview 24 candidates to be chosen for an award and also to be named valedictorian.

The interviews were spread out over several days as we had to see eight candidates a day. I was the only professor who sat through all the interviews while the other professors came in for one session but not the others because of other administrative commitments.

I listened attentively to every answer and response when my colleagues probed the candidates with questions about their future careers, papers, work experience and opinions on some social or environmental issues.

Unlike my colleagues, who were probing for future professionals, scientists and industrial leaders, though, I was searching for the characteristics of future educated citizenry and also, hopefully, a future political leader for this messed up nation.

So my questions were as follows:

> What book have you read in the course of your student life that changed some meaning or perspective about the world at large for you?

> What lessons have you learned from a culture or faith other than your own?

> What books would you like to read to improve yourself for a future you would like to see or have?

> If you were to meet the prime minister or vice-chancellor for a one-on-one interview, what would you ask him or her to do for youth in a future Malaysia?

None of the candidates - all of

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whom had a CGPA (cumulative grade point average) of 3.99 or 3.75, four being the highest - could answer my questions adequately.

The question about books was clearly something none of them expected. The question about learning from another culture or faith left them speechless. The question about meeting the PM or even the VC caught them by surprise.

What does it mean that 24 young men and women who excelled in our education system at the highest level couldn't answer these questions? Not having read any life-impacting book, how are these young people going to have a different opinion or understanding of issues around them? Are they destined to be like the other thousands of university graduates unquestioningly accepting packages of "truths" about history, politics, religions and other matters at face value? What

kind of leadership can we hope for from graduates who cannot form a different view or narrative of issues and problems?

My worry is that Malaysia will be the same 60 years down the road.

What kind of leadership can we hope for when the *creme de la creme* of graduates did not even think it is worthwhile to learn from another culture or faith?

Are we destined to be citizens trapped forever in our own specific "tempurung" of race, religion and politics?

Is that not a scary scenario? Can future first class educated citizens assign dignity to all 39 other races in this country and thousands of other races in the world? Will we still see a Kedah Menteri Besar incident of complete disregard for a different culture and faith in a future Malaysia?

Sadly, I think we will, and not one but many.

When I asked the question about meeting the prime minister or the vice-chancellor, the students were clearly unprepared, as if, "Wah, I get to meet the PM or VC!". Why is meeting a PM and VC such an alien or "prestigious" event? Are these two individuals so important, so high up that they are like the Malay versions of *dewa-dewi* or *pari-pari dari kayangan* (fairies from imagination)?

It seems that in their whole life as students and even into adulthood, meeting "important people" like the PM is like an audience with the

Yang di-Pertuan Agong. This shows what I call a self-imposed feudalistic mindset. These university students are still thinking like the little boys and girls given little flags to wave as a minister's motorcade drives by. If they were lucky, they would just make out the minister's hand waving at the crowd.

The fact that the prime minister is a "servant" (civil servant, remember?) of the rakyat and the VC only has a job when there are students in a university are two facts that have never been "taught" to these first class degree students, apparently.

The last question that had no iota of response was how to change or improve a future Malaysia. These students with impressive CVs of career activities, academic excellence and administrative responsibilities had no thoughts about the many possibilities of life in a different Malaysia. How to change when you do not know what to change or even that change is remotely possible?

When a university stresses knowledge of the now and not possible futures, there is no direction for any nation to move in. Our drivers now are politicians who think only of their own ambitions, their families, their race and their faith.

And our universities don't ask about a different future for Malaysia. The only knowledge that is given is the "now knowledge" accredited by the MQA (Malaysian Qualifications Agency) towards a

future that is only an arm's-length deep and no more.

A grand narrative of a new Malaysia or a narrative of several new futures are clearly not part of the graduating requirements of Malaysian tertiary education. *Aiyaa*, good luck lah ini macam!

I have actually asked many graduates of many different universities in Malaysia the same four questions in informal meetings and conversations. The non-response is common across races, faiths, universities and academic fields. I had expected that the social science students could answer my questions better than the hard sciences or engineering graduates, but semua sama-sama tak tau!

Finally, to soothe my worries about future leaders for my grandchildren, I asked the secretariat to arrange some kind of workshop for me so I could speak to these "super graduates" before they leave the university about a different narrative of life where the dignity of individuals is more sacred than any "sacred certificate" or a future where work provides meaning without having to worry about basic shelter and nourishment for the family. How would these "magical" futures come about?

Well, if you don't dream 'em, they ain't gonna happen-lah!

My wish for this new year? To find a valedictorian candidate who can answer my four questions - even one pun jadi-lah! Happy New Year, my dear Malaysians!

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