

Our academic regression is at a critical stage

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Malaysia needs to re-focus. No more of deep fake videos, whether all men who go to the gym are gay, what gender slept with what animal, or who wears black pants.

There are more serious reasons why our leaders should be hauled up. A sex tape (assuming it is not fake) is not one of them. Global ridicule is punishment enough.

As of 2017, Malaysia's total population stood at about 31 million. Some 14 million are either already in school or in the process of entering the education system. Another 13 million are parents who are supposed to monitor their school-going years, and see them through their first degree at tertiary level.

A small proportion of them are also pursuing higher education, either as a temporary break from their jobs, or to update their skills to advance in their careers.

The remainder four million could be retired, but are most probably done with their child producing and nurturing roles as parents. They are probably grandparents whose roles in educating the young are just as vital and indispensable.

It is obvious, education is relevant to all 31 million Malaysians. So how can we take it so lightly?

How has turning to Japan, Finland, India, the UK or US added value to our education system?

So far, I see no paradigm shift. I do not see major policy reforms. These are nations with different historical experiences, cultures and values. We have failed to adopt and adapt because we are ignorant of “what” to adopt and adapt.

Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad is probably the only politician who has repeatedly nagged us about the “work ethic”. And he has been accused of being over-critical, too hard on the Malays, manipulative and senile.

We are familiar with media and civil society discourse which highlights bellicose appeals to “stop insulting” Muslims, the need to “protect” Islam from Shias, Christians, DAP, and the “threat” to national security. It exposed the insecurity of Muslims.

Our education policy is to blame. It is based on a misguided application of our values.

Education Minister Maszlee Malik appealed for “the culture of happiness, love and mutual respect” in schools and universities. It is an excellent value system. A curious society would tweak his statement to stimulate further discourse.

Have Malaysians been unhappy, devoid of love and rude to one another for the last four decades? Is this the reason Malaysian society is becoming more divided?

Or is Maszlee's call for these universal values irrelevant and misplaced?

A small percentage of progressive Malaysian thinkers remain in academic oblivion. While there is hope for them, their thoughts in exposing the reasons behind our failing schools and universities remain isolated. This is due to the lack of an intellectual spirit among us.

Before readers start rolling their eyes at my use of the term "intellectual", let me remind you that its definition is not as esoteric as you might think.

To illustrate the point, we turn to a stellar period in human civilisation, that of the Abbasid caliphate (750-1258 AD)

Institutions of higher learning flourished and spread throughout the Islamic world during the Abbasid era. These are among the oldest in human history.

The oldest university on record is Ez-Zitouna University, established in Tunis in 737 CE. Curiosity and the intellectual spirit propelled ninth-century Muslims to establish Islam as an inclusive and progressive civilisation.

The situation in contemporary Malaysia, according to sociologist Syed Hussein Alatas, is quite different. We are consumed by the spirit of “intellectual indolence” (Intellectuals in Developing Societies, 1977).

There may be pockets of intellectual activity, confined to the universities and civil society, but as a collective, institutionalised and “assiduously promoted activity”, there is a failure to discuss vital “themes”.

An important theme the Abbasids lived by was “inclusion”. It was a way to persuade people throughout the empire to accept their rule.

The Abbasids encouraged Christians and Jews to serve in the government. They made sure that the most talented people would be involved in running the empire. This theme of inclusivity fuelled the intellectual spirit. As a result, their history is rich in progressive ideas that encouraged inter-religious dialogue and understanding.

Institutions of higher learning mushroomed all over the Muslim world. These were centred in Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo and Cordoba.

However, towards the end of the 12th century, intellectual progression into modern science, social science and humanities became restricted. This was not a result of geopolitical events alone (i.e. the Mongol invasions). Actual reasons were already inherent in the restrictive ideological worldview nurtured by new political attitudes. The leadership made sure there was no room for creativity. The Muslim world today is similar.

Sociologist Toby Huff explained that a “cultural artefact called curiosity” allowed Western society to be open to foreign ideas”. He declared that this was the key ingredient that contributed to the scientific revolution in the West.

He surmised that this was lacking in the late medieval Muslim world. A more accurate explanation, though, is the emergence of intellectual indolence among the Muslim leadership.

Towards the latter Abbasid period, there was a zealousness among political and religious authorities to suppress the freedom of experimental ideas in the natural, religious and philosophical sciences.

There was a gradual rise in religious intolerance which led to the decline in intellectual activity. Muslim leaders manipulated dogma to justify an extravagant and arrogant elite class. Progressive thinkers were ignored, and corrupt administrators flourished.

One such leader was Abu Ali al-Hassan al-Tusi (1018-1092), also known as Nizam al-Mulk.

He was the grand vizier of the Seljuq dynasty, and a driving force behind intellectual inertia. He created a system of education known as “Nizamiyah”. It focused on religious studies at the expense of independent inquiry.

Islamic studies became institutionalised and were seen as a more lucrative career path. Previously, sciences and Islamic law were intertwined.

Nizamiyah was anti-Shia, in favour of a narrower, theocratic Sunni theology. Al-Mulk's political ambitions rendered universalism and inclusiveness irrelevant. His policies promoted a repressive, despotic leadership, in line with his nefarious desires to remain in power.

There are similar patterns in Malaysia's short history. We have not had the stamina to focus on themes. We prefer to highlight popular developments for political ends. We do not delve deeper, to draw links from other stimuli that exist in society.

For instance, the Muslim-only laundromat issue sparked outrage, as did when a number of high-end hotels barred front desk staff from wearing the tudung.

Soon after, an academic paper published by a collaboration of two public university academics was circulated. The article, published earlier, in 2016, suddenly amassed critiques and widespread condemnation. The theme highlighted in the article was racial discrimination in private sector hiring for the job market.

Had the issue not been sensationalised by the media, via the laundromat and hotel front desk issues, this article would have gone unnoticed. The authors of the article remain unknown despite racism and bigotry being a major socio-political crisis for decades.

So, where is the intellectual spirit of these academics?

They shot to instant fame thanks to the stupidity of the hotel and laundromat, not due to their academic prowess.

Our schools and universities have not nurtured this spirit. They do not inculcate the art of deconstructing societal problems.

Our universities do not teach students how to identify a relevant theme that should be observed from every possible angle. There is a lack of staying power of ideas. Most importantly, our education system has failed to provide Malaysians with the skills to anticipate, to creatively predict society's problems based on current trends.

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