



Jeff Ooi

Two ministries, one destiny?

Education ministers must justify their appointment by making reforms.

The grand old Education Ministry has been split into two. The *Kementerian Pelajaran* and *Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi* will now handle pre-university and tertiary education respectively.

Will this strategy be a breeding ground for more bureaucracy, or can the national education's objectives now be easily streamlined? While time remains the best judge, I would rather be an ardent fan of the optimist. Indeed, there has never been a better time to tackle the systemic flaws and misadventures that have come to plague our education system thus far.

Abetted by the boom in discovering science, technology and multimedia as the new phenomena of a digital economy, our policy makers have forsaken the fundamentals in education and become disillusioned. They have mistaken sciences and innovative technologies as the new engines that drive national economies. They opted for feel-good and me-too showcases and have forgotten about human capital who enable a country to compete with advanced countries.

In the basic education domain, we flip-flopped from '3R' to computer-aided smart-schools – which didn't take off quite as planned – while the morale of the teachers remains at its lowest ebb. There is no pride in becoming teachers anymore. Compared to their compatriots in the civil service, whose jobs are classified as either professional or managerial, the educators are classified as the lowly 'Support Group' under the Malaysian Remuneration Scheme. Worse, incentives for them to upgrade

themselves academically remain illusive.

On the other hand, student population acutely outgrows facilities in new townships due to rapid urbanisation. Obviously, there is a big gap between the capacity projection and absolute deliverables.

On the tertiary education sector, we have once spoken unabashedly of our dreams to make Malaysia the regional hub for education. We had plans to corporatise the public universities and give them greater autonomy and flexibility in decision-making. We have also been promised government support for twinning programmes and the setting up of branch campuses with foreign universities to help boost participation by the local private enterprise. We were totally sold to the idea that the two-pronged strategies could help bring in foreign exchange and, at the same time, enhance the standard of local tertiary education through knowledge transfer.

However, the bureaucracy of the National Accreditation Board (LAN), the agency tasked to accredit courses, had apparently hindered the approval of some study courses although some colleges claim to have met the necessary requirements. To complicate the situation, I was shocked with the expose of fraudulent operators who run private colleges without complying with the accreditation requirements. In the end, it was the students of these colleges who were stranded and victimised in their quest for graduate degree programmes.

We are now facing issues we never faced before. Some of the pressing issues are: mismatch of university courses with market needs;

unemployed and unemployable graduates; severe lack of R&D culture among the academics and post-graduates; and the perennial issue of brain-drain where our talents are enticed with better offers from overseas.

On top of that, we now have a generation of pre-university students who are not interested in reading. Incidents of indiscipline and gangsterism are getting more acute. Sill, against all odds, we must applaud Putrajaya for taking the bold move to segmentise our educational challenges and have their deliverables re-defined and re-aligned.

I hope the two ministers will justify the trust placed in them by coordinating their policies and development plans seamlessly, so that bureaucratic bottlenecks could be minimised.

I hope they will prioritise their agenda in the next five years to tackle several critical problems that has dogged our delivery system and slowed down our quest for excellence, glory and distinction in education.

As education shapes and moulds our future citizenry, we should make their learning experience, from pre-school to tertiary, cohesive with the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia*. They must be given the capacity to interact freely in schooling environment to help them live the true life of a plural society in Malaysia.

Last but not least, we should acknowledge mediocrity exists and advocate meritocracy in all levels of education. **mb**

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