



Jeff Ooi

Reforming Education

Get a blueprint or a smorgasbord of woes will ruin remedied

The Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, chose the recent launching of the Multimedia Super Corridor 'Next Leap' as the appropriate platform to announce several imperatives on education reforms in our country.

Statement One. Construction of new smart schools would be stopped with immediate effect. This is to make way for the conversion of the country's present 10,000-odd national schools into smart schools by equipping them with facilities in information and communications technology (ICT).

His rationale is simple: It costs RM20 million to RM30 million just to build a smart school, let alone equip it. Converting present schools will be quicker and more cost-effective than building new smart schools.

Statement Two. In tandem with the plan to convert all schools into smart schools, the PM wanted all students, not just those from selected students in smart schools, to be IT-savvy. To achieve this, the government has decided to equip existing schools with the necessary ICT equipment, which will be upgraded from time to time whenever necessary.

Statement 3. Abdullah said all schools might soon have a uniform timetable, and the instruction has been passed down to the Education Minister for execution. The PM said a uniform timetable would allow schools to receive simultaneous broadcast of educational TV programmes utilising *TV Pendidikan* (Educational TV) as well as benefit from tele-conferencing on certain subjects.

His rationale is partly aimed at tackling problems related to the shortage of specialist teachers and learning facilities - especially those relating to science and mathematics - to provide guidance to students all over the country, without the

need for the teacher's physical presence at the schools.

I am quite sure the PM wasn't dishing out piecemeal solutions to end all woes in our education system because, during his early days of ascendancy to office, he had already spoken aloud about the need for a total revolution in education. Nevertheless, the way suggestions were oozing out without the indication of a new blueprint really scares us, and the minister too.

In his response, Education Minister Datuk Seri Hishamuddin Hussein said schools could start using educational television programmes by the end of the year, once timetables are made uniform. He then said having a uniform timetable might not be practical as not all schools are having single-session.

He was also reported to have said that the move to use educational TV and teleconferencing could be steadily implemented without a need for extra budget this year since most schools already had television sets.

Taking these statements at face value, the minister might have been ill advised as, technically speaking, there are a lot more to connecting teleconferencing with just TV sets.

Recently, veteran politician Tan Sri Musa Hitam, himself a former education minister, remarked that 'ad-hocism' has been plaguing our educational system for the past 10 to 15 years. Such policies are causing us much pain, he says.

Not too recently, many schools were being built, computer labs were being constructed - some delayed and some abandoned - while notebook computers and LCD projectors were provided for the teaching of Science and Maths in English.

Till today, we have yet to learn how far computers, admittedly the tools of learning, have been put to more effective educational

use that should have produced better learning outcomes.

We may like to ask the PM what he had in his mind when he talked about a revolution of our education system? Has his version of revolution been preceded by a long chain of process which encompasses careful gathering of facts and evidences, meticulous thought and analysis, immaculately presented solutions and flawless execution?

To this, a local newspaper suggested the setting up of a permanent commission on education by an Act of Parliament.

It says the commission will ensure the important first step of bringing to the fore in a public, open and systematic manner all the conceivable issues in education besides laying the foundation to lift education out of its present quagmire.

Perhaps, we should be brave to admit that, all along, our education system had faced multiple challenges that remain unresolved, ranging from the role of nurturing our children from nursery to tertiary levels, right to integrating the different races with one common will, and the practice of meritocracy for university admission.

What made the complicated situation more complex are the incessant direction and policy flip-flops at the ministry, which happened due to the changing ministers to suit shifting political scenarios. As a result, consistency and continuity suffered.

I strongly feel that one new approach to reinventing the education system is for policy-makers to re-look the entire spectrum of the Malaysian human capital equation mandated by the emerging strengths of k-economy and globalisation. This could help us step forth with the right leg forward. What say you? **mb**

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