

We need fresh, out-of-the-box ideas now

THE state of the nation's education system has been under close scrutiny for some time now. Practically everyone has something negative to say. Not only are educationists pouring out their frustrations over the sorry state of the system but virtually every sector of society has joined the fray too.

The new Education Minister, Dr Maszlee Malik, who has promised to overhaul the entire system is under a lot of pressure to deliver. Admittedly, it is not an easy task. There are many conflicting demands. In a WhatsApp group to which I belong, strong words about the many years of abuse are all too common. All are calling for a total revamp not only at the primary and secondary levels, but more so at the tertiary levels.

The minister himself has expressed disgust at the way the nation's universities have been obsessed with ranking – often times neglecting the real national agenda before us.

So far there have been no shortage of criticisms. But real workable solutions have yet to surface, never

mind being submitted for the attention of the ministry. Even the recent appointments to the advisory panel attracted some unfounded criticisms – some were even downright toxic.

Academicians are very critical of members who do not have the right experience as educationists being on the panel. Such critics may have failed to recognise the fact that the past policies, which they have been critical of, were all developed by the so-called education experts. It may be time for some out-of-the-box ideas.

The minister has been holding many discourses and engaging with various parties hoping to gather ideas. Kudos to him.

What is clear to all is that education is an important investment for the nation. Few would disagree that it has been through education that many have escaped the clutches of poverty, especially those from rural Malaysia. It has also been through education that we have been able to raise human talent to positively respond to the economic and social challenges of the past.

Now the challenges are different. The economic situation has changed. As a nation, we now face a different kind of competition in the world. Many countries have improved their competitive positions through advancements in innovation. In a world where innovation is now a major criteria for competitiveness, the business playground has changed. And with the pressures of climate change, the demand for sustainability has also become even more urgent. And we already can see how this affects us directly, in the export of our palm oil to European Union countries.

Admittedly, the economy is not the only agenda driving our investment in education. Education also has the objective of producing citizenry that can help resolve some of the nation's social ills. And there are many which have been plaguing our society.

Some, such as unemployment and corruption, are rooted in the failings in the economy. Others, such as drug abuse, ethno-religious strife and crimes, can be attributed to poor social upbringing. Of

course, misguided education would take some share of the blame here.

As a small country that depends a lot on external forces to support our economic endeavours, there is also no doubt that we need to have the capacity to effectively engage such forces. Language skill is important in this – the more languages the better.

Of course, the obvious global language of engagement is English. But there are those among our educationists who are bent on opposing moves to equip our young with English language skills. As if mastering a foreign language would be at the expense of our own native language – what a misguided notion! The education system will have to deal with such diehards.

Whatever it is, we have to decide one way or another. We need fresh ideas. Hopefully the new panel of advisors can propose them!

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