

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**
**DZULKIFLI
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Whither philosophy of science and education?

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad's statement that the definition of a developed country should be expanded to include factors such as "highly educated populace" is very timely.

He was quoted as saying: "We need thinkers, we need philosophers and we need Nobel laureates." The last category is implicit because it is invariably a group of thinkers (not tinkerers as in many cases), if not philosophers, in their own right.

While Challenge Six of Wawasan 2020 comprises establishing a progressive society, contributing to a scientific and technological civilisation of the future, it falls short of articulating the need for the non-sciences and humanities at the same time.

We have gone full steam into Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) without being rooted in any kind of philosophy or the larger understanding of what makes up the "civilisation of the future".

I dare venture to say most of our scientists and technologists have not been "educated", even in the philosophy or history of science.

STEM today is no more than utilitarian in nature, more for the sake of material creation without higher purposes for the benefit of humanity. This lends itself quickly to the idea STEM must therefore be English-based.

Perhaps fewer still are aware the so-called "modern" science today grew out of "natural philosophy" — only that philosophy has been discarded — if not distorted — to fit the new materialistic view of science and technology.

Professor Murad Merican expounded on this in his article, *Philosophy Will Not Go Away* (*Learning Curve*, Oct 26, 2014).

It is hardly surprising when a philosopher-mathematician asked mathematics students and professors why calculus is performed with "limits", many of them looked blank.

Some (especially the professors) were irritated by the "silly" question. "Silly" because science has gone into the realm of "superstitions" — and like superstitions, the fundamentals are not to be questioned but to be swallowed whole. Therefore, the practice of science becomes an "unthinking" exercise

and is taught in like manner (so much for Higher Order Thinking Skills).

In other words, science and technology are considered the snake oil for all problems that plague us today. Some scientists even look down on the non-sciences, failing to appreciate that far from a panacea, science and technology are part of the cause of many of the current world issues.

It is only very recently that we have come to the full realisation that we have compartmentalised knowledge in fashioning a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand, much less look for sustainable solutions.

In his keynote address on the role of 21st-century university at the 2015 International Exhibition and Conference in Higher Education in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia last month, Cambridge University professor and vice chancellor Sir Leszek Borysiewicz cited the university's mission statement with an emphasis on "contributing to society".

He said it is crucial to solve human problems in the human context. Scientific and technolog-

ical approaches are just some of the many attempts to look for solution(s).

By no means the only approach, he stressed the role of the non-sciences in contextualising solutions complemented by humanities in a transdisciplinary way.

Dr Mahathir seemed to appreciate this when he said Islamic and Moral Studies are essential to "teach the difference between right and wrong". Otherwise, "what is learnt can be abused".

While this is true, I humbly suggest that the teaching of Islamic and Moral Studies as knowledge to different groups should not be artificially segregated but combined into the study of great civilisations — beyond that of science and technology as enumerated in Wawasan 2020.

Here is where the role of philosophy across nations and cultures could be better contextualised and understood in creating a much needed common platform to solve urgent human problems.

At the same time, it illustrates how "thinkers" emerged to push the frontiers of education in profound ways. They delved into deep-

er wisdom that was all encompassing and balanced such that catastrophic human-made global problems were few and far in between then.

Indeed this led not only to a "highly educated populace" but also a deeply conscious one that the National Education Philosophy aims to nurture, apart from realising the Second Challenge of "a society with faith and confidence in ourselves, distinguished by the pursuit of excellence and respected by the people of other nations", not least because we can think for ourselves based on our values, norms and traditions that shaped our own philosophy and meaning of life, mindful of our distinct roles and contributions on the world stage.

Without thinkers and philosophers, come 2020, we are no more than *kerbau dicucuk hidung* as the saying goes!

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Correction

In the article *Thanks for the 20 years* on May 3, the acronym WHOCC should read as World Health Organisation Collaborative Centre for Drug Information Service for the Western Pacific Region and the maximum stated is "publish or perish".

The errors are regretted.