

THEMED Decolonisation, Leadership and Knowledge Democracy in the 21st Century, the International Conference on Decolonisation — the third in the series — was held in the country last week.

Co-hosted by the Higher Education Leadership Academy, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), it brought together speakers-practitioners from around the world for a three-day intense discourse.

The keynote address was delivered by Ahmed Keeler, Distinguished Fellow of the Tuan Guru Haji Mohd Yassin Muhammad Islamic Leadership Chair at the Faculty of Leadership and Management in USIM. The event was officiated by Higher Education director-general Professor Datuk Asma Ismail.

Both speakers set the tone for the need for lasting changes and new ideas to move the higher education agenda forward in the 21st century.

In search of balance

Much has been said about this, including the so-called 21st century skills. The notion of a balance,



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however, has not been articulated in depth.

Asma made specific mention of the need for balancing tangibles and intangibles so that education is not left without a soul, producing merely good employees but not good citizens and human beings.

Ahmed added a larger narrative of balance or *mizan* between the saint/scholar, and warrior/statesman as well as that of merchant/entrepreneur.

Each has clearly defined leadership roles that determine the overall balance, and therefore "well-being" of the human person, the community and, indeed, the civilisation in general.

The importance of leadership with respect to knowledge democ-

cracy was touched upon throughout the conference.

Directly or otherwise, this is closely associated with the process of decolonisation in bringing back balance through education.

It is no longer adequate to look at nurturing the individual and his community in a detached or siloed fashion, without recognising the context of the local community and the attendant cultural values and norms.

Put simply, the organic roots of the education system, which are often uprooted and rendered irrelevant through colonial processes, must once again be rediscovered and restored in the narrative of *mizan* within the framework of the saint/scholar, warrior/statesman and merchant/entrepreneur. Treated separately in isolation and in a detached fashion will only create an ambience of imbalance (or widening imbalance in the existing context), leading to a state where the individual and the community experience crisis after crisis that will eventually cause a

collapse, dragging the civilisation with them.

This is often preceded by an "extreme" state of affairs where the pendulum swings far beyond its own limits, invariably forcing an instability of sorts.

This seems to be the case of the "modern" that purports continued growth without any understanding of its own limits.

And that growth has to be artificially supported through an unending need for change — at times called "innovation" — by disrupting the very essence of maintaining a harmonious balance.

On the contrary, in most traditional societies, the idea of balance was an integral part of the way of life before it was supplanted by "modern" issues of ecological crisis previously unheard of, at least not in the catastrophic dimensions as frequently seen today.

Humans then are conscious enough to appreciate maintaining balance — a relational state of respect for nature of which they are part of.

Destroying that relationship would entail threatening their very existence as nature undergoes its own demise.

Of late, Malaysia has witnessed this too clearly, albeit just the tip of the iceberg. Floods are telltale signs that we have transgressed the relational covenant that we have forged with nature since the days of our forefathers.

And it is therefore only natural that we pay the price for this transgression with our lives.

It is not as though we are unaware of the importance of balance since the National Philosophy of Education or *Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan* makes specific mention of the need to nurture a balanced human person (*Insan seimbang*).

In fact it even recognises the essence of *Insan seimbang* in the context of the spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional nexus which could easily be translated into the saint/scholar, warrior/statesman and merchant/entrepreneur framework.

The issue remains — will it be in a harmonic balance (in the words of the National Philosophy of Education)? This, no doubt, poses a leadership challenge moving forward.