

COMMENT

Raising bar on vocational training

CHALLENGES: It needs to be integrated into Education Blueprint to be truly accessible

THE year 2013 has been an extremely busy year for both the local and global Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) community. With the past half a decade or so witnessing a period of weak economic environment, the youth labour market has been adversely affected. The upside to this, however, is the increasing awareness of the important role TVET can play in improving employment prospects for youth.

The International Centre for TVET (Unevoc), an institute within the United Nations' education agency Unesco, had its hands full with numerous research and knowledge exchange projects

throughout the year. Between August and November, it organised five regional forums, focusing on strengthening regional harmonisation of TVET transformation and seeking to promote a more sustainable TVET system in enhancing the skills of youth. The deliberation results are being used by Unevoc to draw up its plan of action for the next two years.

Another significant event for the global TVET community last July was the World Skills Competition (WSC), the biennial "Skills Olympics" where hundreds of young people from around the world compete to demonstrate their skills in various trades. This year, the competition was held in Germany, home of the model TVET system.

Our country also sent a delegation, where our youths bagged nine medallions of excellence in welding, plumbing and heating, electrical installation, hairdressing, fashion technology, cooking, restaurant service, refrigeration and air-conditioning, and IT network systems administration.

At the local level, 2013 has also

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been an eventful year. In preparation for WSC and the regional-level Asean Skills Competition, the Human Resources Ministry organised the annual national-level Malaysia Skills Competition in collaboration with the Works Ministry, as well as the MySkills Competition for trainers in TVET.

At the policymaking level, implementation of the Vocational

Transformation Plan (VTP) by the Education Ministry has gone on in full gear, with the opening up of many new vocational colleges nationwide. The number of these colleges has now reached 79, with more in the pipeline.

Challenges abound as we enter the new year. Going by VTP's timelines, we should now be stepping into the second phase. The number of schools offering junior vocational education, where students enrol in the vocational stream from lower secondary level, should now reach 150, while there should be at least 83 and 48 public and private colleges respectively nationwide. While we are making good progress in the number of public vocational colleges, much still stands in the way of achieving other targets.

First, the number of schools offering the junior vocational education programme in 2014 is roughly half the target, although this may not necessarily be negative. Early streaming into the vocational path has its own opposition.

Perhaps much debate and study is still needed on the impact of early streaming before the programme is rolled out on a much larger scale.

Another glaring shortfall is the

number of private vocational colleges. At only four, it is evident that the VTP, for the most part, remains driven by the public sector.

But with the existence of so many private skills training colleges nationwide, what actually prevents them from being part of the vocational college network?

Does it reflect the quality of these colleges? Is there a mismatch or incompatibility in the curriculum or standards? Has cost become a significant impediment?

Quantitative targets aside, a greater challenge for TVET is the harmonisation with the mainstream education system. While VTP is part of the National Education Blueprint, it remains unclear how VTP is integrated into the larger blueprint.

With many changes taking place in both systems, it would be a tough balancing act trying to align one with the other.

The Education Ministry should consider coming up with a scorecard, not just to monitor VTP's progress, but also to highlight any shortfalls so that improvements can be immediately undertaken. This would maintain VTP's relevance in truly transforming TVET in the country.



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