

Vocational-Academic Divide: Mind the Gap*

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Vocational education is always mentioned in one way or another in discussions on the quality of Malaysia's education system. Very often, vocational education is seen as a savior of students ill-served by current arrangements. It is one of the current 'in' things in education policy. But I find it unfortunate that many of us have continued to internalize three false assumptions.

First, there has been an institutionalized idea that students can be exhaustively divided into two mutually exclusive groups; the academically-inclined who will undergo academic education and the 'hands-on' students who will adopt vocational education.

Recently I had the privilege of participating in a national conference for research on technical and vocational education, co-organized by Universiti Tun Hussein Onn, the Department of Polytechnic Education, the Department of Community Colleges Education and the Higher Education Leadership Academy. I was told that being under the Ministry of Higher Education, all lecturers in Polytechnic and Community Colleges are required to write and present research papers, like their peers in universities. The conference was therefore an excellent platform for this purpose.

But it was also an eye-opener. I was impressed by the many participants who presented innovations in their field. Many papers were well-written, though others had room for

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Vocational training

much improvement. These research papers are proof that integration between academic and vocational education is not inconceivable.

Nonetheless, the conference which I attended would have benefitted, and have been more balanced if there had been greater participation from educationists from vocational institutions under other ministries such as the Ministries of Human Resources, Youth and Sports, Agriculture, Rural and Regional Development as well as state level agencies. For a national level event, participation from these institutions was relatively low, save for that from the Ministry of Education.

At one point in our journey, we had taken a step towards bridging the vocational-academic gap. Beginning in 1995, all vocational schools were upgraded into technical schools. This move aimed to increase the number of students with a strong basis in mathematics and science, in addition to technical-based subjects. Vocational and skills streams were maintained in these schools.

Under the vocational transformation plan, technical schools have been converted back into vocational schools in preparation for upgrading into vocational colleges. But, it is too early to judge the impact of this exercise on the vocational-academic divide.

Second, people tend to assume that students who do not perform well in school are not academically-inclined and therefore will be better served by hands-on education. This assumption can be found if one reads between the lines of the many statements and documents, locally or abroad, that attempt to promote vocational education.

The result is everyone jumping on the bandwagon in appearing to appreciate the value of vocational education, although in reality, parents' 'not-for-my-child' attitude has not changed, and may even be reinforced. Vocational education remains a tough sell to parents and students.

There are many reasons for non-performance in school. It may reflect dissatisfaction towards the rote-learning system, the curriculum, or the teaching style. It may be a sign of learning disability, as seen in dyslexic students (although these students go on to do well in university if given adequate support). It may also be due to factors totally unrelated to learning capacity and ability, for example relationships with parents, teachers and peers.

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There are also students who show neither aptitude nor interest in academic or vocational studies. Unless educators attempt to discover the underlying reasons, channelling students arbitrarily to vocational studies will not be really helpful. More importantly, vocational education should not be seen as a dumping ground for students who are perceived as having little prospect in succeeding in mainstream education.

Third, students with a hands-on tendency are often assumed to have limited intellectual ability and therefore likely to fail in academic education.

A reflection of this assumption is the reduced academic emphasis in the Basic Vocational Education (BVE) programme for lower secondary students, currently at the pilot stage. The Ministry of Education needs to assure parents of those students who choose or are chosen to participate in the programme that vocational education will not result in reduced literacy and numeracy skills.

Otherwise, two situations may arise. First, the vocational path may lose its appeal to students who possess the ability to perform in academic education, but have a hands-on inclination. Second, the perception of university as the single route to success may be reinforced. Indeed this is the popular belief, and not only in Malaysia. Newly re-elected US President Barack Obama was quoted as saying, 'A higher education can't be a luxury, it's an economic imperative that every American should be able to afford.'

Rather than gain in esteem and usefulness, vocational education may continue to be seen as second class, while students may continue to choose academic qualifications in subjects that have little value in the labour market.

The three assumptions above are major reasons for the limited success we have achieved

so far in closing the vocational-academic divide, though many have insisted that both tracks should be held in the same esteem. The line we have drawn separating academic and vocational education is actually manufactured, if not imaginary. So to close the gap, this line must be made as indistinct as possible, and the intersection of both tracks must be enlarged. But unless we disengage ourselves from the false assumptions, vocational and academic education will remain miles away from parity.



Vocational student receiving an award

Obviously though, changing an entrenched belief is easier said than done. Many policy analysts attribute the success of the vocational education system in countries such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland to the long history of apprenticeship and workplace learning, in their systems, going back as early as the 14th century.

Nonetheless, I believe that even in a country without such a history, one should not simply dismiss the prospect of eliminating the vocational-academic gap. There are countries that have successfully overturned the negative perception towards vocational education. Our neighbour down south, for example, has equipped its vocational institutions with state-of-the-art facilities and that has shifted the people's view of vocational education from that of a dumping ground to a sought-after track.

However, we should be mindful that vocational education eats up a significant amount of resources. Money may be poured down the

drain if not spent carefully and wisely. In Professor Alison Wolf's critical review of Britain's vocational education last year, she revealed that despite countless reforms and millions of pounds being spent, hundreds of thousands of British students have been put on worthless vocational courses. We have to avoid going down the same path.

That means ensuring that the curriculum and the resulting qualifications are valued by employers of today and the future, not the past. The vocational transformation plan is heading in the right direction by taking steps to allow those with vocational qualifications to enter into the civil service. But with the private sector as a larger employer of the country's workforce, the government needs to ensure that our vocational qualifications have the private sector buy-in too. In short, we can only safely say that the vocational-academic gap is bridged when it has the recognition of all stakeholders, namely students, parents and employers.