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Heading for a high -income economy

By Mazlena Mazlan

Offering a vocational path in at 'regular' schools contributes to a skilled workforce

ONE important part of the vocational education transformation plan launched by Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin last month is the Basic Vocational Education (BVE) programme.

Beginning with a pilot run this year, BVE will gradually replace the vocational subjects taught in regular secondary schools since 2003.

BVE is a step in the right direction to achieve the aspiration of having a 50 per cent skilled workforce by 2020.

But can it increase student enrolment in technical and vocational education and training (TVET)?

The target enrolment for BVE under the transformation plan is five per cent, but targeting student enrolment in TVET by the government is not something new.

A 1979 cabinet report aimed for a TVET enrolment of at least 50 per cent at upper secondary level, while the current target is 20 per cent by 2020.

Malaysia's enrolment rate of eight per cent at secondary level and 18 per cent at upper secondary level can be compared with the 44 per cent average enrolment in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.

The most obvious difference between vocational subjects and BVE is that vocational subjects, taken at upper secondary level, do not result in any certification.

BVE, on the other hand, taken at lower secondary level, leads to a Malaysian Skills Certificate at levels one and two.

BVE students can then continue at upper secondary level in vocational colleges, the other important part of the transformation programme, to earn the Malaysian Skills Diploma.

This option, of course, is also open to non-BVE students.

BVE enables students to enter the workforce with a recognised certification by the time they finish their lower secondary level.

With MSC levels one and two preparing trainees for occupations at the production and operation level, it prepares students as low-level blue-collar workers.

This is good for students who would, otherwise, drop out of school.

But with the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia qualification valued more highly and a requirement for public sector employment and entrance to higher education institutions, some parents may become worried that their children might drop out of school to work before finishing upper secondary school.

Most schools offer only one assigned vocational subject, despite being allowed a maximum of four.

This is due to costly facilities provision and short supply of trained teachers. In the BVE pilot run, each school offers only one course.

The number of courses available in the full run will depend on the availability of facilities and teachers, and students' demand.

Students will be limited to either taking the courses offered by their school or not participating at all.

For BVE to be meaningful, there should be enough courses or subjects to choose from in each participating school, with at least one school in every district.

Students opting for BVE should be exempted from having to go to the closest school.

This way, the vocational option will be fully open to all students, without competing for limited space.

The Education Ministry is planning to upgrade vocational schools into vocational colleges. Regular schools will also be converted into vocational colleges.

But a vocational college is an upper secondary-level institution. The ministry should stretch this a bit further by converting regular schools into full-fledged vocational schools, with a full vocational stream that begins at lower secondary level.

Rather than having five per cent of students in a school participating in BVE, let's have the whole school participating.

The dual education path has contributed to a large proportion of skilled workforce in Germany, Finland and South Korea.

The vocational education transformation plan, if implemented, will bring about a major change in the education system.

Apart from equipping schools, teachers need to be trained, so the higher education sector needs to step up to this role fast.

We are one-fifth through the decade to 2020.

Within the next five years, BVE and the transformation plan must lead to a dual education path with equal standing.

If Malaysia wants to have a 50 per cent skilled workforce, the government must be bolder in its student TVET enrolment targets.