

COMMENT

Bridging academic-vocational gap

BLURRING THE LINE:

False assumptions are the reasons for limited success

VOCATIONAL education is always mentioned in one way or another in discussions on the quality of the education system.

Very often, vocational education is seen as a saviour of students ill-served by current arrangements. It is the “in” thing in education policy.

But I find it unfortunate that many of us have internalised three false assumptions. First, there has been an institutionalised idea that students can be divided into two mutually exclusive groups — the academically inclined who will undergo academic education and the “hands-on” students who will follow vocational education.

Recently, I had the privilege of participating in a national conference for research in technical and vocational education, organised by Universiti Tun Hussein Onn. I was

told that being under the Higher Education Ministry, all lecturers in polytechnics and community colleges were required to write and present research papers, like their peers in universities.

The conference was an excellent platform for this purpose. But it was also an eye-opener.

Many presented new inventions and innovations in their field and many papers were well written, even though there was room for improvement in others.

Importantly, they were proof that integration between academic and vocational education is not inconceivable.

At one point in our journey, we had taken a step towards bridging the academic-vocational gap. Beginning in 1995, all vocational schools were upgraded to technical schools.

This 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.

Nonetheless, it is too early to judge the impact of this exercise on the academic-vocational divide.

Second, people tend to assume that students who do not perform in school are not academically-inclined and, therefore, will be better served by hands-on education.

This assumption can be found between the lines of many documents that attempt to promote vocational education. The result is everyone jumping on the bandwagon in appearing to appreciate the value of vocational education, but in reality, parents’ “not-for-my-child” attitude has not changed, and may even be reinforced.

There are many reasons for non-performance. It may be a reflection of the dissatisfaction towards the rote-learning system, the curriculum or teaching style. It may be a sign of learning disability, as shown by many dyslexic students who do well in university if given proper assistance.

It may also be contributed by factors totally unrelated to learning tendency and ability, for example relationship with parents,

teachers and peers.

There are students who show neither aptitude nor interest in both academic and vocational studies. Unless educators attempt to discover the underlying reasons, channelling students arbitrarily to vocational studies will not be really helpful.

Third, students with hands-on tendency are assumed to have limited intellectual ability and will therefore fail in academic education. This assumption is evident from the reduced academic emphasis in the Basic Vocational Education (BVE) for lower secondary school students, currently at the pilot stage.

An important implication of this is students with hands-on tendencies may have to take a longer route to university, which, by the way, is also wrongly perceived as the only way to succeed.

Another implication is BVE may not be appealing to students who possess the ability to perform in academic education but have an inclination towards vocational education.

The Education Ministry needs to ensure that students who choose, or are chosen, to participate in the programme will not lose out with reduced literacy and numeracy skills, thereby reinforcing this assumption.

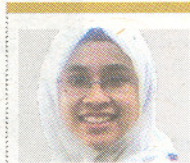
Rather than gaining in esteem and usefulness, vocational education may continue to be seen as second class and students continue to choose academic qualifications in subjects that have little value in the labour market.

The three assumptions above are major reasons for the limited success we have achieved so far in closing the academic-vocational divide.

The line we have drawn separating academic and vocational education is actually manufactured, if not imaginary.

Many have insisted that vocational education should be held in the same esteem as academic education. In order to achieve this, the line separating the two must be made as blurred as possible, and the intersection enlarged.

But unless we disengage ourselves with these false assumptions, vocational and academic education will remain miles away from parity.



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