

Keynote Address NAPEI

Written by Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah

Wednesday, 18 June 2014 13:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 18 June 2014 13:07

I would like to thank the organisers for the invitation to address the NAPEI 3rd International Skills Conference of which, I am told, the Government of the State of Victoria, Australia is a main partner. I am honoured to speak before such a distinguished audience. Allow me, in the first instance, this opportunity to wish The Hon Louise Asher MP, a pleasant and enjoyable stay in KL. I sincerely hope that she will be able to take time, in between her schedule, to soak in the sights and sounds of our city.

2. Please also allow me to say well done to the organisers of the conference for their effort in bringing a delegation of vocational education and training providers from the State of Victoria as participants. I am sure the local delegates will be looking forward to their participation, and the sharing of experience will undoubtedly be useful to everybody. The cooperation between NAPEI and the Victorian Government augurs well in the effort to create the right platform for interaction by local and international education and industry players. It is hoped that this will create the opportunity for one to learn from the other. In this regard, the theme of the conference – Transforming the Skills Workforce: Producing World Skills for a Developed Nation, 2020 and Beyond – is apt in its choice. Coming as it does on the home stretch, as it were, of Malaysia's dash to becoming a developed country, this theme is indeed suitable and relevant.

3. I have, in a speech at the recent convocation of Universiti Teknologi Mara, made known my views on the education system that is in place here and its impact on development of human resources and the promotion of the good citizen and national unity, both still at best a work in progress for this country. Of the two, the role of the education system in the production of a high-quality workforce is crucial in meeting the demands of a developed economy, especially in the highly competitive world economy today.

4. By way of example, Germany, Finland and South Korea and Australia are among the prominent cases demonstrating this point. The first is renowned for its Teutonic efficiency in dominating the luxury segment of the international motor vehicle market with its three high-end marques. The latter two have been consecutively the market leaders of the global digital communication and telephony industry since the last quarter of the 20th Century. And Australia, leveraging on its vast resource economy, have created an excellent education system at all levels to produce the high-level and technical manpower not only for its industry but also many of the corporate leaders, professionals, engineers and scientists for Malaysia through such programmes as the Colombo Plan in the 60's and 70's. Many studies have consistently placed the education system of the four in the top 20 among developed countries.

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5. Sad to say, but which must be unashamedly admitted by the political and the education leaders of this country, that Malaysia's education system is dysfunctional and inconsistent with its ambitions to become a developed country by 2020. No less than the World Bank in March 2014 underscored its anxiety at the low quality of Malaysia's education system. And by international standards of comparison such as PISA and TIMSS, the skill levels of our workforce are unfortunately in the lower third of such rankings. The National Education Blueprint recently launched by the Government aims to raise Malaysia to the top third of the international rankings by 2020. This a courageous and important goal to achieve and presents considerable challenges to politicians, policy makers and implementers alike. Independent commentators would question whether the government has the resolve nor the resources to achieve this target, education already taking the largest proportion of the Federal Budget each year. But this planned transformation of the Malaysian education system is long overdue, but one wonders whether we can achieve it at all, given the constraints not only on the pocketbooks but the available manpower resources to achieve it. We face very many daunting tasks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. I will not hesitate to state the obvious that this task begins at the most fundamental level, that is at the primary or elementary school level, where emphasis must be given to proficiency in the 3R's – reading, writing and arithmetic. It is now not uncommon to find Malaysian students in the Fourth Form or so of the upper secondary or high school still struggling with their comprehension of language or mathematical problem solving due to their poor grounding in these skills. It goes without saying that there is almost no penmanship to speak of. I would say that there is a place for 3 'R's in the modern teaching methodology; for these are the basic skills so essential and important to our children's learning process.

7. Second, in terms of academic content, there must be a balance between the imparting of academic knowledge and the equipping of skills for vocations. This would mean that apart from the basic subjects offered by the comprehensive education of the secondary school, vocational subjects must have their place in the education system. This would help to meet the demand by the various trades and industries for certificated master craftsmen. To meet this requirement, new subjects geared for the development of skills education must be introduced in addition to such subjects as Industrial Arts, Home Science and IT currently being offered as part of the secondary school curricula. For example, courses to develop master electricians or master welders; or courses relating to the construction industry such as masonry, plumbing and tiling are worth considering. This attention to vocational subjects will enable our education system to be in synchronisation with what is wanted by the industrial and business sectors in terms of the manpower entering the job market.

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8. To date there are about 90 community colleges established in the country out of a total of 222 planned as announced in the 2000 Federal Budget. These colleges are seen officially as part of a policy of lifelong learning to enable not only for those who are not academically inclined but seek more trades-related training, and are also open to school dropouts or those simply unable to enter tertiary level education institutions. It is also open to mature students and have less formal entry requirements. I understand that at the diploma level, which is equivalent to associate degrees in America, students have the opportunity to reenter the formal academic stream if they so desire. One cautionary tale out of the American experience is a tendency on the part of the community colleges to emulate their tertiary counterparts and thus defeat the purpose of community colleges to train skills needed for the immediate community. These community colleges, built with lesser standards of public works, but still adequate for the purpose, should complement the more expensive and limited space for enrolment in technical colleges and polytechnics.

9. In paying attention to vocational education does not negate and absolve our education system from continuing with the current general academic stream. However, we must develop a mechanism – say, for instance, at the level of the Fourth Form – to channel students into the academic or vocational stream. In any case, the opportunity to continue one's education to university level must be made available to both streams. In this regard, academic standards of universities must be rigorously and jealously maintained. This should help to reduce the number of unemployable graduates.

Ladies and gentlemen,

10. I have thus far talked about what our system should give weightage to, and that is to vocational education, in order that our workforce may be equipped with the requisite skills in our progressing to the status of a developed nation. But, putting in place the right syllabus and curriculum does not guarantee that we will successfully produce skilled and knowledgeable human capital to form the backbone for a first world economy. Other equally important factors must be in place in order for us to achieve the educational standards that we aim for. When these factors are properly accounted for, I am confident that the seeming disconnect between graduates entering the job market and employers, which render many of them unemployable in the first instance, would be eradicated.

11. In this regard I have been attracted for some time with the German “dual education” system, where it is compulsory for tertiary level students to undertake a comprehensive year off from their academic studies to attach themselves for industrial training, and to return to their course to complete their studies for the diploma or degree. Maybe this system is being implemented in

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our tertiary education system in patches, but the overloading of the curricular year with all kinds of academic requirements, whether for religious or moral studies, civics programme or national history as compulsory requirements makes for a tight fit in the academic calendar. Something in the academic programme year has to give to accommodate this “gap year” if this idea of integrated academic and vocational training is to be taken seriously to achieve the objective of more balanced employable graduates rather than just mere paper-chasers.

12. One of the critical factors in making a success of a skills-driven education system is the availability of teachers. This noble profession that once attracted the crème of the crop to its fold has lost much of its lustre. It would seem that job seekers look to teaching as a last resort when there is no other choice in the employment market. This has somewhat affected their classroom performance as the pressure for securing a job overrides the need for performance out of love and dedication. The prevailing attitude seems to be that teaching is just a job. In turn, this indifference affects the way the public views teachers generally. I don't blame the teachers actually for this less than stellar situation in their profession. Overloaded with teaching, committees and the perennial training courses have led to overworked teachers. Coupled with the lowest average pay according to some comparative studies amongst Asian countries, teachers nowadays in Malaysia could not be blamed for a lack of incentive to better themselves or to take pride in their job.

13. This situation must be arrested. Teaching must be brought back to the pedestal it once occupied in this country. The service must be so packaged as to attract the best entrants to the job market. Entry qualifications into the profession must therefore be commensurate with the attractive terms and conditions of service. It is perhaps not too ambitious to set the entry qualification into the service maybe at the level of a Master's degree. We should note that this entry qualification is fast becoming a norm in the first world. But more than this, the authorities should find ways to incorporate master-classes involving practitioners in industry to conduct the courses hand in hand with the full-time teachers. This should not only ease the load on them but also expose their students to real world situations rather than just textbook learning.

14. I think it would be opportune if this Conference should engage with this problem and discuss ways and alternative models with respect to desirability, effectiveness and cost, for such an academic-masterclass/apprentice teaching-learning process to be introduced comprehensively in our country; and I am sure there are already such experiments in Australia, especially the State of Victoria such as carried out through the TAFE system. I want to even be more serious in pushing this idea to you; I think a Government-to-Government programme of teacher training and exchange between the Australian TAFE system and Malaysian technical-vocational schools should be put together not only to provide needed teaching power immediately but also provide in the long-run the teaching base for Malaysia in the years to come. I throw this challenge to you to come up with such a proposal in your Conference in the next three days!

15. Apart from paying attention to the qualitative aspect of the candidate in attracting the best to be teachers, we should also look at the quantitative aspect of the service. In the main, the number of pupils in a secondary school is about 28 to a class for the Arts stream. It is roughly between 32- 35 for the Science classes. This is an improvement over the situation of the 1970s when the average size of a secondary school class was about 45 pupils. This was due to the shortage of classrooms and teachers as a result of the rapid expansion of secondary school following the introduction of the comprehensive school system in the second half of the 1960s. However, it should be noted that the present classroom size is not much better than what it was in the early days of independence to the early 1960s.

16. We must improve the classroom size and the student-teacher ratio in our schools. It is a measure for developing high quality education. The mere presence of a highly qualified and well-trained teacher will not count for much if this ratio is not brought down to a reasonably low level. The teacher will be hard pressed to give time to individual students, let alone offering quality attention to them. The time is perhaps right for us to correct the situation by stabilising this ratio at around, say, 20:1. This is certainly not too much to ask for. The developed countries have, by and large, a lower ratio. Finland, for instance, has a student to teacher ratio of 15:1, albeit coming from a lower population base. I believe this relatively small class size will help to create conducive environment for a more positive and personal student-teacher interaction. The stumbling block to this idea is, of course, the perpetual shortage of teachers. A medium-term solution to this is to retain good teachers who are of retirement age. More often than not these teachers are passionate about their jobs; the argument being, they would have left teaching otherwise given the propensity of teachers being under scrutiny every now and then.

17. There is another critical factor in undertaking a transformation of the education system to an high-skills based one, and that is the fact that our schools are now too examination rather than learning- oriented, where the focus is on getting strings of 'A's thereby putting unnecessary pressure on the poor student. To overcome this, the student resorts to memorising and rote learning. This negates the purpose of going to school. The obsession with getting an all 'A' exam result is such that the national Press and media would go over each other to provide coverage of it. But any news editor worth his salt would tell you it is no longer newsworthy.

18. Rote learning where students then regurgitate what has been learnt by heart will not prepare and help students to think through a problem when he is at his workplace. It is perhaps timely for us to think about introducing Logic and Thinking as a school subject. This could, for example, be taught to lower secondary pupils possibly as a precursor to Elementary Philosophy and Critical Thinking that could be offered, say, as a compulsory but non-examinable subject, to

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upper secondary students. To my mind, such subjects as Logic and Philosophy are important if we were to encourage and promote conceptual learning. This would go a long way to helping job seekers meet employers' expectation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

19. An issue that is not often spoken about openly when we discuss the education system in Malaysia is the implementation of the system itself. It is a sad commentary on our sometime inability to have clarity in the division of labour between policy makers and implementers that politicians often end up doing the latter's job. This amounts to political interference and it should not be condoned. I certainly don't, my being a politician notwithstanding. The danger in this meddling is the tendency for an issue to be politicised and degenerated into controversies. A clear example is the continued controversy on the on-and-off position of English as the language a pupil is allowed to use in answering mathematics and science papers in exams. It is time that educational bodies were run by professionals. More importantly, these professionals must be allowed to offer policy options that are in the best interest of students and the nation without their having any fear of being browbeaten by petty-minded politicians!

20. The mention of English brings me to the point about communication skills of our young people who have gone through their secondary and tertiary education at home. This soft skill is somewhat underrated; but a skilful communicator with potential has a far greater chance of landing a job than an equally good candidate who keeps shifting in his chair with eyes looking at the table-top during a job interview because he is not confident when he speaks. Given the state of our interconnected world, good communication skills become all the more important. The efficient and well performing employee will therefore need to be proficient in the language considered to be the global lingua franca, English that is.

21. The state of interconnectivity between countries nowadays is such that it is no longer adequate for our schools to merely teach one foreign language. We should now seriously think about the teaching of a second or third foreign language that will certainly be useful for the Malaysian worker whose market must surely be the world if we were to progress to the level of a developed economy. Obviously there are many useful languages to choose from; but I am sure the education professionals will be able to shortlist a few that are particularly useful to Malaysia. I would, however, suggest that this second or third language be offered as a choice that will be taught perhaps for the five years of the secondary school phase.

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22. Let me now draw your attention to two school-going age groups that are hardly on our social radar screen, namely the disabled and the dropouts. Much more needs to be done to ensure that the disabled are given the same educational opportunities as normal students, so as to prepare them for life as society would for any other member of the community. I am told that Australia is miles ahead of Malaysia in implementing advanced special education needs, but more importantly in their job-placement. This calls for a more thorough look at the educational requirement and skill-training needs for different types of disabilities. It must be done with a view to meeting the various and specific requirements of this special group with skills they can cope with and master, thereby affording them equal employment opportunities.

23. At the same time, dropouts must not be laid to waste at the fringes of society. Given that there is a fair spread between late developers and early bloomers in human development, it would be unforgiveable waste if dropouts were not given a second chance. It is therefore incumbent upon us to ensure that they have a second or even third chance. They could, for instance, be trained to develop specific skills as fitters or electricians. In this regard the Institut Kemahiran Belia Negara Dusun Tua [the Dusun Tua National Youth Skills Institute] whose role covers, among others, skill training for youths could play a role. More importantly, there should be a hand in glove relationship between the institute and the educational authority in order to offer dropouts a light at the end of the tunnel. In this regard the points I made earlier about the advent of community colleges in Malaysia is moot in this regard.

24. We must now dispense with the notion that education is the sole responsibility of the teacher and the school. Parents have an equally important role in the education of an offspring, as should be the case. But for parents to be useful in supplementing what the teacher does, they must be aware of and conversant with our education system. Therefore, parents need to be given guidance which would prepare them in giving advice to their children regarding prospects for tertiary education and beyond that, the sort of career to choose. In this regard, the preparation of the parent for the guidance role could be arranged in a similar fashion as that of the adult education programme to eradicate illiteracy in the period just before Merdeka and the early post-Merdeka days. Alternatively, it could be designed along one of those courses by Institut Latihan Kemas [the Community Skills Training Institute], a useful organisation which has unfortunately been politicised and has somewhat strayed off its original reason for existence.

Ladies and gentlemen,

25. Let me quickly touch on the fairly ticklish issue of unemployable graduates that makes us collectively hot under the collar. It is not unknown for some of these graduates to sign up for further academic courses such as an MBA in their failure to find employment. I would go further

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and urge the government to undertake the retraining of these graduates in areas that they are interested in such as business or law or accounting. This amounts to value addition and, in the process, make them more marketable. Incidentally, this had been done in the early 1970s under the auspices of the then ITM (now UiTM) where graduates of the so-called lighter academic courses, and therefore more difficult for them to land jobs, were provided similar training as I had just mentioned.

26. Finally, I would like to touch on a point that does not concern education directly but has, nevertheless, a bearing on the size of our human capital. We must admit that the practice of mandatory retirement at the age of 60 is a waste of talent and experience. With good dieting and healthy lifestyles in comparison to previous eras, the worker of today is considered to be in his prime at 60. It is also generally believed that his wisdom peaks at around this age. Combined with the experience that he picked in his working life, a man who is about to retire is essentially in his prime. If you agree with this premise, then this act is a crying shame and a sheer waste of talent and experience. I would suggest that we think seriously about reemploying and redeploying this group. Refresher courses or completely new ones under various schemes could be developed to cater to this lot. And as in Japan, a nation well known for the longevity of its citizens, the reengagement of the “silver-haired” generation is a boon to industry and a huge development dividend for the development of a high-skills workforce for the country in driving towards developed status.

27. I would like to propose that we seriously address these four groups with a view to gainfully absorbing them into the national human capital pool. If we did this successfully, I am sure that the issue of labour shortage will be squarely addressed and our dependence on foreign labour will begin to be solved.

28. I hope that you will, in your deliberations, consider any or all of the views that I have shared with you. I have no doubt that whatever consensus of opinion that you arrive at will be well received and considered for the good of Malaysian education which has an impact on the country's economic and development strategies.

Ladies and gentlemen, on that note I wish your conference the success that it deserves. Thank you and good morning.

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AT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS (NAPEI)
3RD INTERNATIONAL SKILLS CONFERENCE

On Tuesday, 17th June, 2014, At 9.00 A.M. at Prince Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.