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Vital for all to be science-literate



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BOLD POLICY RESOLVE: 'Science Literacy for All Malaysians' key to developed nation status

RELIGIONS make pronouncements of the coming of Doomsday. Science makes predictions of the end of the world. Asteroid strikes, solar flares, earthquakes, volcanoes, supernovae, collapse of the food chain, global nuclear war, genetic mutation, ionised plasma, apocalypse from outer space or man-wrought catastrophes could, individually or collectively, cause the extinction of mankind or of the world as we know it.

Efforts to understand the universe and man's role in it must go beyond the seers, soothsayers, diviners, prognosticators or omen-interpreters. Evolution, creation, space-time and existence must be seen not just in terms of personal mortality, but also in terms of the species and Earth itself.

While the events of doomsday may come tomorrow, people have to get on with the challenges of daily living now/today. People have to make sense of the contemporary world and of personal existence and demise, of national existence, civil strife and failed states. To understand the wars of the ignorant as well as the ultimate end of the species, there has to be scientific knowledge acquired and mastered by all.

Education is never complete. To acquire good education means to go beyond basic literacies. The ideas of basic, intermediate and advanced literacies have not been examined in terms of types and levels of literacies. Education is not just about educational provisions by state or communities. There is much more to education. The learner must seek education as the learner seeks the truth.

The leaders of tomorrow are educated by the universities of the world in every nation. Last month, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), for instance,

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enrolled new students in undergraduate programmes.

Of the 7,000 students in the distance education programme, more than 2,772 are science students who will learn Biology, Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics.

Through its various continuing initiatives, USM has become the leader in the education of human beings with the best of existing knowledge. The provisions of higher education in the sciences and professions are in the universal traditions of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Imperial College, Moscow and Beijing universities.

The contents of scientific knowledge and thought processes are more than the science subjects offered by schools and universities. In fact, a large corpus of social sciences' knowledge as well as the knowledge of the arts constitute scientific thought, creativity and imagination. The curriculum in existence in schools and universities has not captured the essential body of knowledge known to man. The curriculum then, especially those identified by professional bodies, is fragmented and strong in the silos of professional areas, but weak in multidisciplinary, multicivilisational and geoscientific contents.

Like education for all, religion for all, right values for all, thinking for all, history for all, science must be for all. Science should liberate trapped minds and, at the same time, not be trapped by scientific fallacy and unbridled fiction.

There is no clear evidence, not just in schools but also in the wider society of systematic, integrated and national agenda, with established programmes, to ensure that every Malaysian has the highest level of science literacy.

As Malaysia aspires to become an advanced society, it has to develop ecology of scientific and technological culture, including the popular culture of science. Scientific imagination and reality can be fostered side by side with religious faiths and beliefs.

Science allows for toleration of blasphemy and the raising of questions that allows minds to seek answers which are not yet found, regarding the universe, matter and energy, time-space and existence, of time long before written history, of the world of Adam and Eve and the time long after the immediate foreseeable future

Of the many inspiring initiatives in the world in education, one stands out boldly -- Science For All Americans (SFAA). Project 2061 was founded in 1985 when Halley's Comet passed by Earth. Symbolically, 2061 will be the year when the comet returns. The Project noted that: "The terms and circumstance of human existence can be expected to change radically during the next human lifespan. Science, Mathematics and Technology will be at the centre of that change -- causing it, shaping it, responding to it. They will, therefore, be essential to the education of today's children for tomorrow's world."

Adult Science Literacy for all Malaysian is a critical agenda if Malaysia is really determined to become a developed nation. Adult science literacy is possible as Malaysia has been successful in implementation of many other kinds of literacy initiatives. SFAM is a matter of critical necessity. There must be bold resolve to do more than possible for the present and future generations.

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