

Let's not neglect the soft skills

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Given that the discussions about the future of education have shifted to world ranking, means of learning, and students' mastery of languages, this writer forecasts a surge in commitment to improving these areas in the coming years.

Perhaps, this could be a step forward in harnessing the latest technological revolution, in addition to stressing teacher's hard work and commitment, and student's participation in current initiatives.

In recent years, this writer has noticed that the tech industry and its cumulative impacts on today's education are proliferating via the nuances of "digitalisation". How technology continuously barges its way into sales, marketing, and supply chains is also not a "fleeting" thing. The Mckinsey Global Institute estimates that applying Artificial Intelligence (AI) on businesses could create an economic value of US\$2.7 trillion (RM39.4 trillion) over the next 20 years. Many fret that it could wipe out jobs, and take over the psychical and cognitive aspects of labour. Hence, it is not a mere historic event. Technology is playing out to assert its supremacy in education in the 21st century. This writer is certain that there will be more clarity than conviviality in technology than education.

Nevertheless, banking too much on technology makes one less familiar with education. In reality, technology might not be helping students to acquire the much needed social skills and emotional intelligence. Technological advancement causes disruption, and to depart from being held a captive of technology, this writer calls for the mastering of humanities, civic literacy, global awareness, cross-cultural skills, cultural diversity and ecological literacy.

Life is remarkably complex as society matures through human inter-relationships, behaviours, attitudes, norms, and foremost, social factors — they all play a central role in shaping our intellectual capabilities. These human trajectories eventually dictate the development of society. The essence of education involves nurturing students with "real skills". It is because of the following fundamental difference — in AI, the key word is "artificial", while the human being is "real".

So, how does education help a student acquire the other essentials? The rule is to re-route intellectual commitment to "engagement" in education. Many are already clamouring that the issue in today's education is more than just revolutionising the means of teaching and learning. Rather, at the heart of learning is engagement. In principle, engagement influences the process of teaching, and is the key to innovation.

Acknowledging the significance of "engagement", Professor Andrew Walker of Monash University said, "Engagement is the key to what universities do. We are

perfectly situated to engage with industries, and to shape a research agenda that will meet the productivity challenges of industry in the new Malaysia”.

Clearly, the goal of higher education should be consistent with literature that supports the view that, to thrive in the 21st century, universities must engage, and students must participate. This vision of education can be enhanced by:

EXPERIENTIAL entrepreneurial education, in which students take up a year internship at startups overseas; and,

SERVICE learning, in which students engage with local communities to create distinctive solutions to social problems.

The goals of such initiatives commensurate with the long-term agenda of nurturing global leaders with amazing social skills, socio-ecological intelligence and leadership. In a similar vein, it facilitates research.

This writer envisions the 21st century education in the following ways: for scholars, it means the overall work of the academy moves towards increasing participation involving broader public discourses. For students, it will mean nurturing creative thinking and empathy. For communities and the public, it will mean they simply cannot be detached from the higher education discourse. The further reality is education’s role in sharing knowledge between learners and for learning from the masses.

Hence, it is called a cross-fertilisation of facts. And, for that reason, a multi-disciplinary approach to research and teaching via engagement warrants an attention. This writer has greatly benefited from embracing diversities through engagement. Why not others from all sections of society?

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