

Reforms must be clear

THE review of the education system should be thorough and some changes must start at primary level.

Universiti Sains Malaysia vice-chancellor and president Prof Tan Sri Dzulkipli Abdul Razak says that policies or reforms should spell clearly what they are for, before they are implemented.

He reiterated that it would be quite senseless for instance, to implement programmes pertaining to language at tertiary level when in fact, they should be initiated at primary school.

"For instance, in terms of improving the English proficiency of students ... this needs to be done from the primary level onwards. It will be absurd to wait for universities to give remedial English language classes," said Prof Dzulkipli.

He was referring to the launching of the New Economic Model (NEM) by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak on Tuesday. Prof Dzulkipli is a member of the National Economic Advisory Council.

The Prime Minister had said the education system must continue to be re-evaluated and improved to create the workforce of the future, with a commitment to merit-based programmes.

Universiti Malaya vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Ghauth Jasmon said educational reform was already happening in many countries in Asia like China, Korea, Japan and Thailand.

"The Prime Minister is right about education changes and Malaysia cannot delay this reformation process of its educational institutions, as otherwise the country will be left behind in higher education," he said.

Prof Ghauth said the annual key performance indicators (KPI) of academics and the academic promotion criteria also needs to be bench-marked against top universities in the world.

Universiti Putra Malaysia vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Nik Mustapha R Abdullah said he could not agree more with the Prime Minister.

"Innovation and creativity can only come about from educational curriculum that encourages thinking and not rote learning.

Prof Dzulkipli who is a member of the National Economic Advisory Council, said the transformation of the education system must be thorough, as it was not enough to leave it to the tertiary level to rectify inherent problems.

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin said the ministry has recognised the need to move away from traditional approaches and being an enforcement agency to one that facilitates and develops growth at public and private higher education institutions.

"We agree that education plays



Najib making a point when launching the New Economic Model during the Invest Malaysia 2010 conference.

an important role and we are ready to help Malaysia achieve the NEM," he said.

Mohamed Khaled said the ministry also recognised the need to produce a highly skilled workforce to meet industrial demands and this was reflected by efforts to upgrade the quality of local polytechnics.

On improving autonomy and accountability of educational institutions as suggested in the book, "New Economic Model for Malaysia Part 1", Prof Dzulkipli said some of the measures proposed by the NEM were already in place.

"The issue of university autonomy for instance is not a new one.

"But the NEM indicates that autonomy needs to be seen as a fundamental criteria of a university, and not a privilege to be bestowed upon institutions.

"My hope is that following this report, serious steps will be taken in implementing the proposals," he explained.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) vice-chancellor Prof Tan Sri Dr Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin said the role of higher education was to nurture the workforce of the future.

"This is a big challenge for us and we need to re-look our curriculum to see how we can make students more confident and have the skills needed to be the workforce of the future," she said.

Prof Sharifah Hapsah said it was easy to teach the discipline but to integrate a global outlook and other skills to graduates is a tremendous challenge.

"This will be a big challenge for my academics and there might be a big revolution but I am willing to work with them as the Prime Minister has unveiled the NEM and

we need a new fresh look at the way we educate our young minds," she said.

National Association of Private Educational Institutions president Elajsolan Mohan said that the call for creativity and innovation was a long awaited one.

"Educational institutions need to seriously incorporate these values in their curriculum if we are to produce globally competitive human capital.

"It is also crucial to ensure that actual steps are taken to make the NEM goals a reality," he said.

On Najib's call for continuous education, UCSI University Group President Datuk Peter Ng said that he welcomed the government's move to focus on lifelong education.

"By providing skills training for the very bottom-level workers, we can produce a technically competent workforce that is relevant to industry needs.

"I just hope this measure will not encompass re-training university graduates, as we should be producing graduates who are industry-relevant in the first place," he said.

Ng, who is also Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities secretary-general, added that the liberalisation of higher education should apply evenly to all private higher education providers.

"Currently, foreign education providers who have set up branches here seem to have more freedom than the local providers.

"We are more than ready to help the government in capacity-building, but what we ask for is a level playing field," he said.

Sunway University College executive director Elizabeth Lee agreed that education is a critical success

factor for the NEM to become a reality.

"We need to equip people with the right skills to drive this through.

"Thus universities need and should be allowed to be more enterprising in order to nurture the enterprising spirit in our graduates to think creatively, act strategically and work with innovation," she said.

Elajsolan said lifelong learning techniques must be embedded in the curriculum even at the undergraduate level.

"These include teaching students how to research and process information for themselves," he said.

Other possible policy measures suggested in the book *New Economic Model for Malaysia Part 1* include reviewing the education system; increasing emphasis on reintroducing technical and vocational training colleges; encouraging research and development - between higher education institutions and industry; and enhancing English language proficiency.

Parent Action Group for Education (Page) chairman Datin Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim said of particular interest, as far as the education system is concerned, is the courage shown by the Prime Minister to acknowledge and address critical shortcomings of the education system, and his strong desire that much needs to be done through perseverance and commitment to "weather the storm".

"For a shift in approach from rote learning to creative and critical thinking, the most immediate step to take would be to lessen the number of examinations within the year in schools," she said.

She said examinations are so frequent presently that little teaching could be done.

"Closer to our hearts, while we all agree that English language proficiency needs to be enhanced, for incomes to move upwards, the people need the 'right' knowledge in the 'correct' language of their chosen fields of expertise, namely, ICT, science and commerce, which will surely be the prime mover of the economy," she added.

Noor Azimah said the change in the medium of instruction from English to the mother tongue in the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics, would further erode not just the English language, but also suffice knowledge to be gained in these very specialised areas of ICT, science and commerce, where English is, without any doubt, the *lingua franca*.