NEW STRAITS TIMES

Navigating AI crossroads and redefining varsities for smarter future

By Dr. John Antony Xavier - December 19, 2024 @ 12:07am

AI should be quickly adopted in tertiary education to shorten the years of study and to cover the shortfall with lifelong learning. -- NSTP FILEPIC

IN Lewis Carroll's children's novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the eponymous protagonist one day comes to a fork in the road.

She asks a Cheshire cat atop a tree which way she should go. The cat replies: "Where do you want to go?"

Similarly, universities are at a crossroads. Do they retain their role of producing responsible citizens and leaders, or submit to the larger needs of the industry?

The blistering pace of development in artificial intelligence (AI) suggests that universities should become factories of talent, teaching industry-relevant skills so that graduates can be future-ready and employable.

However, the traditionalists beg to differ.

They argue that for centuries universities have a purpose beyond skills development.

Crucially, universities offer an all-rounded education.

They expose impressionable minds to diverse ideas, cultures and disciplines.

Offering a safe environment for social discourse, universities enhance the political and cultural sensitivity of students and, thereby, broaden their worldview.

As universities induct students into the art of critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills, students boost their ability for interdisciplinary work in a diverse workforce.

These skills are valuable across all professions in contrast to industry-specific technical skills.

The impact of a university education on students' intellectual capacity is undeniable, traditionalists argue. Our educational journey will vouch for that.

As we progressed in our education, our intellectual capacity to see the big picture too improved.

In his 1980 book *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, John Finnis, an Australian philosopher, asserts that for "human flourishing", knowledge is one of the seven items that man ought to pursue for its own sake.

What better place to do so than in a university?

Universities are also bastions for ideas and innovation as the industry moves away from undertaking serious research and development.

We might quibble over the commercial utility of university research, but their contributions to industry are plenty, from climate change and renewable energy through biotechnology and agricultural innovation to AI and big data.

Within this spectrum, medical, space and marine research abound.

All this research might be compromised if universities focus on skills development.

However, traditionalists must also face the uncomfortable truth that tertiary education does little to alleviate unemployment among degree-holders.

It is heartbreaking to see some 220,000 graduates unemployed after the time, effort and expense spent on tertiary education.

About 27 per cent of degree-holders are underemployed, holding positions unaligned to their qualifications.

On Nov 30, at the 37th National Association of Private Education Institutions, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abd Kadir sounded the alarm for reform to the education system.

All these point to the route that universities must take to remain relevant. Here are three strategies.

THE FIRST is to reorient university education to the needs of the industry.

This should include AI literacy and how AI tools can be design-ed and integrated at the workplace.

To determine which courses should be pioneered, universities should consult industry leaders.

Tweaking the education system would require universities to revise their curricula. It might warrant dedicated faculties for producing skilled graduates needed by industry.

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia has pioneered the first AI Faculty. Others have incorporated AI-skills training in their curricula.

To have more dedicated AI institutes, universities should pool their resources — financial and IT expertise — rather than establishing them individually.

SECOND, to help overcome society's aversion to technical and vocational education (TVET), universities should recognise TVET qualifications.

They should fast-track those with such skills through a related academic degree.

That move will make TVET more palatable and ensure that more people sign up for upskilling and reskilling.

THIRD, AI should be quickly adopted in tertiary education to shorten the years of study and to cover the shortfall with lifelong learning.

In a fast-paced world, knowledge gets outdated.

Therefore, lifelong learning will enable graduates to revisit their disciplines at their institutions to update their knowledge.

For universities to remain relevant in the AI era, tertiary education should evolve.

How they do so and how quickly they do will matter not only to society but also to their survival.

The writer is an adjunct professor at Perdana University