

Why the arts matter to Malaysia's future

IN Malaysia's hierarchy of academic prestige, the arts stream has long occupied the lowest rung. For generations, parents and educators have absorbed a damaging assumption that the arts are a consolation prize for those who cannot survive the rigours of science, and that choosing them is tantamount to choosing professional irrelevance.

We celebrate our doctors and engineers, yet view aspiring artists, designers, writers and historians with a quiet anxiety, sometimes even pity. This prejudice is not only outdated, it is also dangerous.

As Malaysia seeks to reposition itself in an increasingly complex global economy, the national conversation on shifting from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) to STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) could not be more timely.

But this shift must be understood correctly. The "A" in STEAM is not ornamental. The arts are the engine that allows technical expertise to connect with human needs, values and imagination. Without them, innovation stalls.

Education is not merely about producing workers; it is also about cultivating thinkers, particularly in early childhood when the habits of mind that shape life-

long learning are formed.

When children draw, tell stories, make music or explore visual forms, they are not engaging in idle play. They are learning how to observe carefully, recognise patterns, interpret meaning and express ideas. These are the same cognitive skills required for scientific reasoning and mathematical thinking.

Much of the resistance to arts education stems from parental fear. The belief that "there is no future in the arts" ignores the reality of the 21st century economy. The arts are not confined to galleries and theatres. They shape the user interface of our banking apps, the design of our cities, the branding of our industries and the explosive growth of the digital content economy.

Today's economy does not only reward those who can calculate; it also depends on those who can communicate, visualise and empathise.

When a creatively gifted child

is forced into a rigid scientific mould, the result is often not excellence but mediocrity. For too long, our education system has treated creativity as secondary to what can be easily measured. The assumption that imagination will somehow flourish without guidance is deeply flawed. Creativity is a muscle – unused, it weakens.

At university level, this misconception becomes even more costly. Arts-based disciplines like design, architecture, visual communication and fine arts are intellectually demanding fields that integrate psychology, material science, semiotics and human behaviour.

In our own multicultural context, arts education also plays a vital role in social cohesion. Malaysia's rich traditions of craft, visual culture and storytelling are powerful tools for identity formation and mutual respect.

Integrating the arts into STEM education transforms this dynamic. Science becomes a pro-

cess of discovery. Mathematics becomes a language of patterns. Technology becomes a medium for expression. Engineering becomes a creative response to real human problems. This is the essence of STEAM.

As Malaysia confronts automation, global uncertainty and rapid technological change, the question is not whether the arts belong in our education system. The real question is whether we can afford to raise a generation without the creative confidence to navigate complexity.

The future begins in the classroom. That future must be imagined, drawn and designed from the very start.

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*(Read the full letter at
thestar.com.my)*