

Editorial

Technology and society: is there a shift in emphasis?

AS RESOURCES for everything, including education dwindle, questions on where to invest taxpayers' money arise. In production-oriented countries a decreasing demand for technological products have been part of a world recession in recent years. At the same time society is experiencing a steady increase in unemployment and the numbers of old people, coupled with environmental and social problems. This entails an increasing demand for services and service-oriented industries. As funding for higher education tends to decrease or remain static, the question may be asked whether we should shift our emphasis from technology to services, in order to be able physically and psychologically to maintain our social balance. Moreover, society is increasingly made aware of the drawbacks of massive consumption, packaging, and their influence on the future of our planet. Sometimes a feeling of guilt may arise in those involved in industries which in the past have brought prosperity to industrial countries—for example, defence industries. A shift in awareness coupled with a slow inversion of the population pyramid may cause a reflection on where we should invest our educational resources. A shift in emphasis towards social and other services triggers reflections on shifts in the allocation of educational funds. Recent developments in Germany show manifestations of technology rejection coupled with the need to develop services and service industries such as health care, gerontological services, social and psychological help, as well as trade and recreational services. With static or declining funding, some institutions of higher education think of investing in the development of education in these service areas. This may mean a slowing down or even a decline in funding for technology and engineering. In particular, if the quality of engineering education is in danger of not being maintained, the question arises whether one can afford such a shift of emphasis in a society that is based on industrial production and exports. While the need for a development in service education is recognised, these services can only be paid for from the sale of market-based goods. Therefore one should be careful in maintaining a balance between supporting technology and non-technology. While the need for engineers may decline in some areas, the quality of engineering should in no way suffer. Engineers are a part of society's changing needs, and they are aware as well as anyone else that in a world of dwindling resources societal concerns are important. Engineers should be aware of new needs, but the social service providers should also be aware that we need engineers in order to maintain our ability to pay and keep those services. A policy which invests in the development of service industry education needs to be coupled with a maintenance of quality in engineering education.

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