Leading when trust is tested

COMMENT
by Dr Kumuthini Chandrasekaram

WHAT happens when people begin to trust a machine more than another human being? It is a question that would have seemed almost unimaginable a generation ago.

Today, as artificial intelligence (AI) becomes embedded in education, workplaces, businesses and everyday life, it is becoming an increasingly important question for society and one that professionals can no longer afford to ignore.

At the Professional Conference and Exhibition (Profex) 2026, held from Sept 29 to 30, this question was part of a much larger conversation about Malaysia's future.

The discussions highlighted the need for professionals to preserve ethical principles, strengthen public trust, embrace cross-disciplinary collaboration and ensure that technology remains a tool that serves humanity rather than a substitute for human judgement, responsibility and connection.

Organised by Balai Ikhtisas Malaysia (BIM), under the leadership of Prof Dr Juan Joon Ching, president of BIM, and themed "Uniting Professions, Transforming Malaysia's Future," Profex 2026 brought together professionals, industry leaders, academics, government representatives, policymakers, innovators and young people.

The significance of Profex went beyond the gathering of professional bodies. It was, in many ways, a conversation about what it means to remain a professional in a world where technology is advancing faster than institutions and where human trust is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

One of the strongest messages emerging from Profex 2026 was that professional excellence cannot be separated from professional ethics.

In an era of AI, automation and rapid digital transformation, technical knowledge alone is no longer enough. Professionals are expected not only to know what can be done but also to consider what should be done.

The point is deceptively simple. A professional qualification provides expertise. Professional ethics determine how that expertise is used. Whether one is a chemist, engineer, doctor, architect, lawyer, accountant, scientist or technology professional, decisions made in the course of professional work can have consequences far beyond the workplace.

This message resonated strongly in the reflections of academician Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor, senior fellow of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia, who highlighted the importance of understanding and living by the ethics of one's profession, which makes integrity, accountability and governance essential components of professional identity.

BIM itself describes its mission around high ethical standards, accountability, transparency and good governance across Malaysia's professional community.

Perhaps one of the most thought-provoking themes was the question of trust. A society can have advanced technology, sophisticated infrastructure and highly educated professionals but without trust, institutions and partnerships become difficult to sustain.

The concern becomes even more significant with the rapid emergence of AI. People are increasingly interacting with systems that can answer questions, analyse information, generate text and images and provide recommendations.

Yet, the more capable technology becomes, the more important it becomes to understand the difference between machine-generated information and human judgement.

The rise of AI also places education at a crossroads. AI should be understood as a tool. Students need to learn how to use technology but they must also learn how to question it, verify information, recognise limitations and make ethical decisions.

Critical thinking, communication, creativity, judgement and responsibility cannot simply be outsourced. This is important as the boundary between human and machine capability becomes increasingly blurred. Malaysia's AI future must be accompanied by an equally strong investment in human capability.

Another important issue raised was the relationship between universities and industry. Reference was made to China's approach of encouraging industries to support universities, creating closer connections between education and employment and giving students clearer pathways into the workforce.

The broader lesson is relevant to Malaysia. Universities should not operate in isolation from the industries they serve. Likewise, industry should not view universities simply as sources of graduates.

The relationship can be much more meaningful where the university prepares the mind, industry provides the challenge and professionalism connects the two.

Industry can bring real-world problems into universities. Universities can bring research, talent and new ideas into industry.

Professional bodies can provide standards and networks while government can create an enabling policy environment. Students, meanwhile, gain opportunities to understand what their professional knowledge looks like outside the classroom.

Today's problems rarely fit neatly into one professional category. A sustainable city involves engineers, architects, planners, environmental scientists, economists and policymakers.

Healthcare involves doctors, pharmacists, chemists, engineers, data scientists, administrators and policymakers.

Digital transformation involves technology specialists, business leaders, lawyers, educators and ethicists.

Climate change requires scientific knowledge, engineering solutions, financial mechanisms, policy intervention and community participation.

The boundaries are becoming blurred. And that is not necessarily a problem; it can be an opportunity. As observed by Datuk Dr Soon Ting Kueh, president of Institute Kimia Malaysia, it is important for professionals to work together, as collaboration across professional boundaries spurs greater recognition and encouragement.

Technology and professional collaboration, however, cannot answer every question about the future. One of the insights from Datuk Hajeedar Abdul Majid, who emphasised education, humanistic values and empathy as fundamental to the survival of society. It is a powerful reminder that the purpose of education extends beyond producing employable graduates.

Education shapes how people understand one another. It teaches people how to disagree, collaborate, solve problems, respect differences and contribute to society.

A highly educated society without ethics can misuse its knowledge while a digitally connected society without meaningful human relationships can become increasingly disconnected.

The conversations at Profex 2026 suggest that Malaysia's future will depend not simply on how advanced its technologies become but on how responsibly people choose to use them.

In the age of AI, professional ethics, human relationships and the willingness to work together may be among Malaysia's most important technologies of all.

Profex 2026 has become a landmark professional gathering, initiating a platform for Malaysia's professional community to see itself not as a collection of separate professions but as a connected ecosystem with a shared responsibility for the nation's future.

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Beyond the statistics: Why are our children silent?

COMMENT
by Dr Asraf Mohamed Moubark

ANOTHER bullying case, another death and another number added to the statistics.

When tragedy is repeatedly reduced to numbers, there is a danger that society slowly becomes numb to it. A child who dies after being bullied is not a statistic. That child is someone's son or daughter, someone's friend and someone's student.

Behind every number is a family left to deal with a loss that no law, policy or government programme can ever reverse.

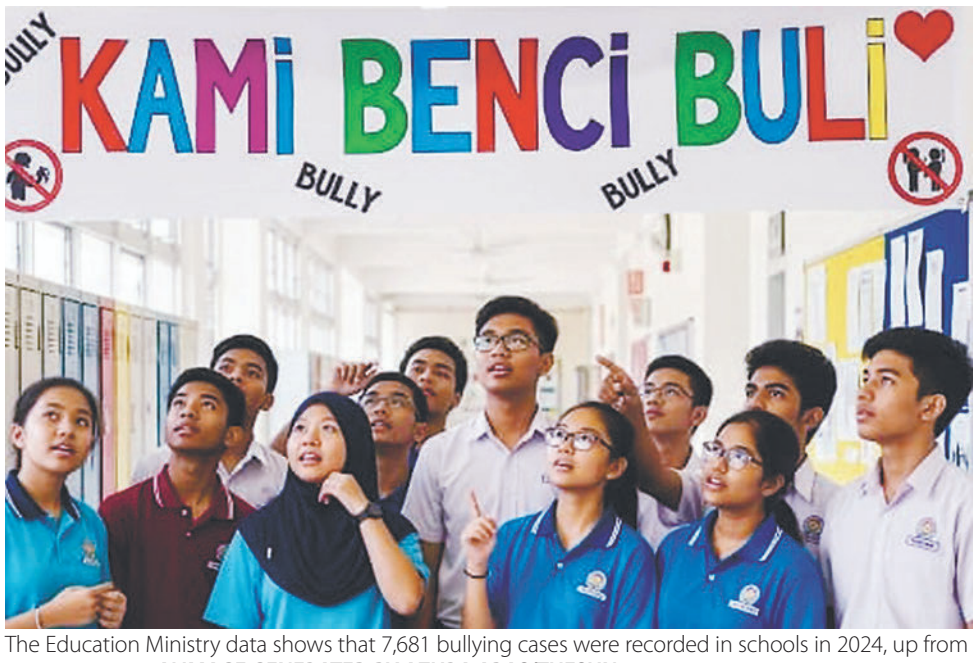
Malaysia has taken significant steps to address bullying. The Anti Bullying Act 2026 and Anti-Bullying Tribunal have strengthened the legal framework while the government has expanded school safety measures, including CCTV coverage, additional hostel wardens, counselling and student protection initiatives.

Yet, the scale of the problem remains worrying. Education Ministry data shows that 7,681 bullying cases were recorded in schools in 2024, up from 6,528 in 2023.

More recently, the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) 2025 findings reported that 27% of Malaysian students experienced at least one form of bullying several times a month or more, compared with 20% across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries. These figures raise an uncomfortable question: What are we still missing?

Perhaps the missing piece is not another scheme, camera or regulation but a deeper understanding of what happens before adults become aware of a problem.

A child who is bullied may fear retaliation, embarrassment or being labelled a "snitch" while some may worry that reporting will make matters worse or that adults will not understand. A reporting system can only work if a frightened child trusts it enough to speak.



The Education Ministry data shows that 7,681 bullying cases were recorded in schools in 2024, up from 6,528 in 2023. – ***AI IMAGE GENERATED BY AZURA ABAS/THESUN***

Parents, therefore, have an important role but we cannot assume children will automatically explain what is happening.

Distress may instead appear through withdrawal, anxiety, reluctance to attend school, declining interest in studies, unexplained injuries or sudden changes in behaviour. These signs do not necessarily mean bullying but they should prompt adults to ask questions and listen carefully.

Schools also need to look beyond policies on paper to ensure students know where to seek help, complaints are taken seriously and teachers feel confident and supported in escalating troubling patterns.

This does not mean blaming schools or teachers. Rather, we should examine whether concerns about reputation, parental complaints or public scrutiny sometimes make difficult cases harder to confront.

Experts have made a similar point. Malaysian Mental Health Association president Prof Datuk Dr Andrew Mohanraj has argued that laws and tribunals need to be accompanied by a prevention first approach involving schools, parents and digital safety.

Child protection specialist Lee Lyn Ni has likewise stressed that laws alone cannot solve bullying and that restorative approaches should help children understand the harm they cause and develop empathy.

This is why CCTV, wardens, counselling, laws and disciplinary measures, though necessary, cannot be the whole solution.

A camera can record an incident but it cannot explain why a child was too frightened to report it. A law can provide accountability but it cannot remove the fear that prevents a victim from speaking.

We need to understand the culture of silence surrounding bullying. Why are victims afraid to speak up? Why do witnesses hesitate to intervene? Why do parents miss the warning signs? And could individual incidents sometimes be dismissed as minor disagreements when, collectively, they reveal a much more serious problem?

Until we answer these questions, we risk adding more schemes without addressing the reasons bullying remains hidden.

The success of Malaysia's response should not be measured simply by the number of laws passed, cameras installed or programmes launched but also by whether a vulnerable child can speak up, whether someone listens and whether that child is protected before the harm becomes irreversible.

A bullied child should never have to become another statistic before we realise that something has gone terribly wrong.

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