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The blossoming of Malaysia's higher education sector



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GLOBAL MISSION: Thousands of foreign students are earning Malaysian degrees

SCHOLARS have begun to develop a narrative of higher education in Malaysia from historical, developmental, comparative, national competitiveness, as well as critical perspectives.

Since the establishment of the Higher Education Ministry, three ministers have led it and each has brought his unique experiences, strengths and management styles.



The present minister, Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, has built on the strengths of the past, including the Wan Zahid Report of the Committee to Study, Review and Make Recommendations Concerning the Development and Directions of Higher Education in Malaysia Towards Excellence (2006).

Almost all of the report's 138 recommendations are being implemented after adaptation. The report recognises that Malaysian higher education inherited

the Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge) models of higher education with the highest quality of educational provision excellence.

Approximately 80,000 academicians and around 1.4 million students are experiencing change and hope. Public and private, small and large, new and older institutions are engaged in the time-honoured tradition and race to "publish or perish" and compliance to technocratic and managerial imperatives.

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Malaysian academicians have published in hundreds of national and international journals. Also, academicians have conducted research individually and in collaboration with colleagues from hundreds of universities abroad. In addition, Malaysian universities have begun to find, define, expand and elaborate on their teaching and research niches.

Malaysian academics have become more aware of and committed towards the global mission of higher education.

Malaysian universities have trained about 100,000 foreign students from more than 120 countries this year.

These graduates will go back to their countries to contribute to the development or reconstruction of their societies and nations. Foreign students in Malaysia also bring in more than RM4 billion annually.

Hundreds of thousands of Malaysians have also benefited from their education abroad in a wide range of fields of human knowledge and they have come back and contributed to the development of the country.

Notwithstanding the criticisms, Malaysian tertiary education continues to contribute to the education of a critical mass of bureaucrats, technocrats, managers, and professionals in various fields.

The challenge continues to be educating competent and knowledgeable people who possess adaptive thinking skills and not just mechanical mindsets.

There is an exciting rush of policy and ideas under programmes such as the Professors' Council and academic excellence awards. Bold and promising initiatives, such as the establishment of INCEIF University (the International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance), Aswara University (the National Arts, Culture and Heritage Academy) and the Genovasi Initiative of innovation Ambassadors (designed to become a university in five years) preoccupy the lives and achievements of academicians.

Sometimes, academicians grumble that "there are so many activities that there is little time to think". The danger in the enterprise is disillusionment creeping in slowly because of the rush of initiatives and activities that do not allow for "pauses of wisdom".

Tertiary institutions are, however, not the be-all and end-all of the knowledge generation and knowledge utilisation initiatives.

In advanced societies, there are research institutions and industries which are driving innovations day by day. The question remains whether in Malaysia there already exist such institutions which challenge the knowledge generation functions of universities.

The question also remains whether universities are collaborating effectively with the pioneers of the knowledge society from industries, civil societies and other knowledge organisations.

Any measures of the knowledge repertoire in the nation must take into account the knowledge generation initiatives and the knowledge repositories beyond universities.

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Dr Fatimah Ibrahim of Universiti Malaya showing a book she co-authored on exercises which can be done during prayers. Academics are in a race to 'publish or perish'.

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Writer is a deputy vice-chancellor, INTI Laureate International University

  

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