

5 Star Colleges?

Horses for Courses

Will efforts to rank colleges fall at the first hurdle?

The debate about ranking and quality assurance in education is proof of at least one thing - nobody agrees about what constitutes quality. The methodology of ranking is coming under fire in the USA (see 'Breaking Ranks' over) and certain high profile universities in the UK have forced a revamp of quality assurance mechanisms (see 'Quality Assurance Aversion' over). Given these open revolts within developed systems, how will a relatively immature higher education system like Malaysia cope?

While academics scoff and college operators fret, the very status of education as a commodity means the consumer deserves to know what he is getting. In Malaysia there is already a broad consensus about which colleges constitute the best of the bunch, but anecdotal opinion fails the 'fairness test'. Different criteria are required for multidisciplinary and specialist colleges and the weighting of each category must account for the inevitable gradations between 'shoplot' and 'greensite campus'. Even so, there is still plenty of room for manoeuvre, which makes some college operators decidedly uneasy. The issue is less about the absolute accuracy of the exercise (nobody expects exactitude) than about the fairness of its administration.

"Rating is fairer than ranking and colleges with similar characteristics should be placed in the same cluster."

Dr Lee Fah Onn, Senior Vice-President, INTI College

fy everybody. And of course, rating is not a science. The quality of the educational experience is highly subjective and cannot be measured like air pressure. As Elizabeth Lee, Principal of Sunway College, observes "The quality of the staff is vital - their attitude and concern for students - not just their paper qualifications." In education there are bound to be intangibles that a simple survey will miss, but proponents of the idea suggest that broad categories providing a general indication of quality would be preferable to the quality blackout currently in operation.

Two years ago, the majority of colleges surveyed by EQ had serious reservations about the proposal. Today, the response is a cautious nod of provisional approval

(see Survey Results over). 64% supported a ranking/rating system for the Malaysian private sector, with 72% favouring the introduction of something similar for the public universities. 72% also thought an independent composite body of public and private interests should oversee the exercise, whilst staff academic qualifications, average student exam performance and teaching facilities/premises were the most important ranking criteria.

Ministry proposal