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Overhaul both public and private universities



By Prof Tan Sri Dzulkifli Abdul Razak - June 3, 2018 @ 9:54am



(Stock image for illustration purposes) The whole higher education landscape should be put under scrutiny if a more comprehensive outcome is desired

ONE former academic-turned-politician recently called for an “overhaul” of public universities for various reasons. Many have merit, but they are not entirely new and have been raised elsewhere before. They are of utmost urgency given the “new” environment post-GE14. And also as part of the institutional reform effort.

However, we would like to argue that the “overhaul” should not be limited to the public sector, but the private sector as well. After all, the national higher education system is made up of the two (that are now regarded to be “seamless”) on a continuum. It only stands to reason why the whole higher education landscape should be put under scrutiny if a more comprehensive outcome is to be expected. The focus on private universities/higher education institutions (PHEIs) can be very substantial, since they (about 500) outnumber public universities (20). In other words, by just looking at one without saying a word about the other may fall short of the desired outcome to “reform” universities without fear or favour. Unless, of course, it is assumed that the private entities are (almost) perfect.

Despite the Private Higher Education Institutions Act (Act 555) introduced in 1997 to regulate PHEIs (including international branch campuses of well-known universities from abroad), there are still apparent “imperfections” therein.

First, the private system is largely based on a for-profit business model, unlike that of many developed countries. In short, Malaysian PHEIs need to be profit-oriented to sustain their education business. This means education is regarded as a “commodity” of tradeable product/service to be “sold” to “customers” (read students) at a price. Free or affordable education is not the norm, making it more “private” goods than “public” ones. As such, not only “cash is king”, but so are “customers” who can insist on what and how to study since they are “paying” for the goods that are offered to them. At times, for this reason, entry and exit criteria are called into question. A “university” may be standing for more than a decade, but yet to graduate any student!

Second, while PHEIs are seen to be more concerned about “quality” to attract customers, what is deemed as “quality” is often the issue. What more if the so-called “university” operates like a factory (inspired by the first industrial revolution) designed to appeal more to the “market”. The direct impact of this is a total distortion of the Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan (FPK), which is the ultimate foundation for nation-building. In other words, we have lost the plot for some decades now.

Third, given such a business outlook, it is predicated on bottom-line and reputation for survival. In practical terms, it is about the game of ranking and league tables that define “quality” as expressed by commercially-driven rankers intended to meet their own bottom line and reputation too. Hence, the synergy between private universities and rankers goes hand-in-hand, where various “ranking” packages are made available to support the former in meeting their targeted “quality” within the said league table. The price of the packages can range in the millions, but are cleverly camouflaged as part of the overall business transaction away from the eyes of the suspecting public and

ministry officials. One thing is sure: students (and parents) enrolled in those participating institutions are not privy to what is going on behind the scenes because the process is generally opaque.

Fourth, those not interested in playing the “ranking” game knowing full well the financial commitment involved will devise their own “strategies”. These include “self-styled” branding and marketing in exerting various claims to be “world class” in this and that, with little evidence to go by. Except maybe for huge billboards and frequent full-page “advertorials” pitched to unsuspecting customers.

Fifth, is the vital issue of nation-building vis-a-vis the FPK. Being commercially biased, the orientation toward FPK is highly questionable. In fact, it is usually construed as contribution to the national economy through the inflows of revenues from international students. Meaning to say that within the entire higher education system, there are various “ghettos of knowledge” that fall far short of the nation-building process as framed by FPK in our own mould as described in the preamble of Vision 2020.

Lastly, as a result, most universities are more tuned to reach out for international or global agenda and less that of the local (FPK, Rukun Negara, etc). Some are willing to cough up millions to be subtitled as a “world-class” institution piggy-backing on another located abroad. Malaysians are then enticed to enrol to “experience” the so-called “world-class” education locally when this obviously is not the case for a myriads of factors, socio-cultural being most prominent.

In summary, like their public counterparts, private universities are no exception based on these random listing as to why the entire higher education system needs to be “overhauled” in tandem, and urgently so. To do this well, an independent and professionally academic-based expert commission is most preferred under the appropriate ministry. This will reduce bureaucracy and other non-academic interferences (unlike today), assuming that the University and University College Act is first and foremost repealed as promised. Not forgetting Act 555 that also must be reviewed. Otherwise, it is an exercise in futility.

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