

Engage with the community

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Comment

New Sunday Times - 10/10/2010

FROM an Ivory Tower to a Trading Tower and now a Human Tower! These are the three major waves that can be ascribed to the evolution of universities in recent times.

From being institutions which are isolated and engrossed in academic work for its own sake, universities were suddenly thrust into another role -- to cooperate with industry as a means of transferring their knowledge for commercial use.

This task is so dominant that many fear that universities have somewhat been transformed into trading posts where knowledge becomes commodities to be traded.

With the advent of patents and intellectual property rights, education turned into "big" business with industry as a partner.

Now universities create their own commercial arms to convert knowledge into material wealth as investment.

Generating income becomes a preoccupation of modern universities, especially when governments are no longer able to support their development financially.

The image of a Trading Tower is becoming so prominent that there are entities called Corporate University being set up to lend support to such activities.

This has led to the notion of for-profit education in the name of democratisation in the world of free enterprise!

Former Harvard University president Derek Bok passionately argues in his book *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialisation of Higher Education* that tertiary institutions are risking their core mission in pursuit of money even when they have to compromise on fundamental academic values.

Although it is gaining acceptance -- at the expense of losing public trust and respect -- this is a dilemma for many.

In many ways, the image of the distant Ivory Tower is being resurrected when higher education institutions work hand in glove with corporations on funded for-profit research, which is cloaked in a shroud of secrecy.



USM students help to paint Sekolah Tahfiz Al-Islah, Kampung Tok Bedu, Tasek Gelugor in Prai as part of a community programme

Some border on the unethical side, laced with conflicts of interest and questionable activities.

In view of this, universities need to once again maintain their position as providers of public good and defenders of public conscience to keep the trust of the people intact.

A university is not for sale to the highest bidder.

Moreover, there is a growing awareness that universities are not the sole custodian of knowledge; and this is where due recognition to the community has not been fairly given.

While there are interactions between the academia and the community, to a great extent, these are asymmetrical.

Universities claim to have the upper hand and often look down on the society as being "unschooled" and therefore not worthy of any in-depth engagement.

Fortunately that is now fast changing with universities experiencing the next wave -- as a Human Tower.

In this phase, universities need to "wear their human face" on their journey to engage with the community.

This would involve mutual learning and co-creation of new knowledge for the benefit of humanity, an imperative that has long eluded the realm of knowledge.

This is even more significant when it comes to those who are most vulnerable and at risk, as Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin noted when he launched *Reaching Out ... Making THE Difference*, a book documenting Universiti Sains Malaysia's (USM) drive towards community engagement last week.

Ultimately, it is about empowering the community to seek its own destiny with university as a partner.

Mohamed Khaled says: "For ages, past institutions of higher learning have been founded to support the society in which they stand, as a place where human talents are promoted and knowledge is generated and further developed.

"In the modern era, the predominant task of universities has been to serve as an extension of national power, supporting local communities and playing a role as the basis for the development of industry and society."

Given the turmoil that the world is in currently, it is only fitting that this responsibility is enhanced once again beyond the mantra of "publish-or-perish".

The Higher Education Ministry deserves to be lauded for being bold enough to suggest a new track for promotion as a way to recognise the importance of community engagement without compromising on the rigour and robustness demanded of a scholar.

That said, USM is ready to take the lead as reflected in the title of the newly launched book. As Mohamed Khaled noted, the emphasis is on the word "THE".

"I believe that as an APEX university, USM has unambiguously embraced the principle of engagement as a core value."

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