

Audacity of hope for higher education

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

Comment

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IN his acceptance speech last year as the newly-appointed Minister of Higher Education Datuk Seri Mohamed Khalid Nordin pledged full support to implementing the National Strategic Plan for Higher Education launched by his predecessor.

Admittedly, in his own words then, the task was a daunting one, given the complexity that surrounds higher education, which prevails not only in Malaysia, but globally.

Even in developed countries where higher education has existed over centuries, the confronting issues are very similar. The difference, perhaps, is that the issues are dealt with in a more sobering approach, involving mostly academics and their fraternities.

Collectively, they thrash out the issues and arrive at a solution backed by their peers. By and large, politicians and political parties are seldom involved, less still turning the situation into some kind of political football, with points scored over one another at the expense of education itself.

Thus, in this sense, Khalid has a tough job at hand. To use the football analogy, he must both ensure that the game is properly played according to the international set of rules and, at the same time, defend the goal post from being ravaged by others, who may not be interested in the rules at all.

To his credit, Khalid has defended the goal post rather well, while taking various initiatives to further move the game into the big league.

So, when he gave his annual address last week to the higher education community, he did it with a sense of pride and achievement. True to his words, he not only supported but, more than that, also facilitated the implementation of the first phase of the strategic plan in a systematic way.

The Accelerated Programme for Excellence (Apex), MyBrain15 and enhancing the delivering systems are among the more visible and difficult initiatives that were launched, putting higher education on a different trajectory from the past.

Indeed, he is more interested in creating the future while leveraging on what has been successfully carried out previously.

This point was well taken when Khaled underlined that there would be no more new public universities.



Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khalid Nordin spoke on the need to populate universities with high quality people

Instead, the emphasis is on the need to build better "intellectual infrastructure" which is well-captured in the ministry's new tagline: "*Meneraju Kegemilangan Ilmu*".

Khaled talked about the need to populate the universities with high quality and talented people, ranging from students to staff. The fact that the 2009 budget allocation is about RM14 billion, a 15 per cent increase from what it was last year, is certainly not a pipe dream.

Further, under the MyBrain15 agenda, some 60,000 PhDs will be trained by 2023.

Thus, moving forward, Khalid expanded on 18 critical agenda which are part of the strategic plan, all except one - academic-industry collaboration.

The tone of his address was accommodating and facilitating. This can be illustrated by a number of concrete steps to ensure a more conducive future. One important change is the implementation of the new amended Akta Universiti and Kolej Universiti (Auku) next month.

Therein is a recognition that autonomy is a critical element in the university's search for excellence, accompanied by a sense of accountability.

It follows that the "command-and-control" mode of operation that has long beleaguered our universities is being gradually dismantled.

The new relationship with the universities is now based on trust and respect, instead of fear.

For too long, the act, rightly or wrongly, has been perceived as an instrument of fear. Universities are now given the flexibility to plan for their own "destiny", as it were, using approaches of their choice in arriving at the strategic goals.

Some of these flexibilities outlined include the mechanism of hiring and rewards, benchmarked against world standards.

Non-conventional modes of degree-awarding courses are encouraged, so too self-accreditation and self-auditing to enhance quality.

Sharing and exchanges of "best practices" between universities and with the industry ought to be more creative beyond what is done today.

There must be an unshackling of the minds in trying to translate the strategic plan for the future where "speed" is of essence.

In summary, the minister's address presents renewed hope for Malaysia's higher education.

With the return of the all-important "trust" to the universities, the uncharted waters are now within reach to make higher education more relevant for the future.

In a way, this perhaps represents our "audacity of hope" as championed by the new US president who took office the same day.

If so, this too will mark a new chapter for Malaysia, particularly in the history of the higher education sector.

Wishing all Chinese readers Gong Xi Fa Cai!

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