

Ivy league universities facing tough competition

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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TRANSFORMATION is rightly about creating a better future for achieving new successes. The past, no matter how successful, can never guarantee future successes, especially in ever-changing tunes when successes at best are often momentary in nature.

Their half-lives are getting shorter and shorter each time, more so when it comes to knowledge creation and generated outcomes. This has serious implications for universities, where knowledge is created and generated, the world over.

Even the more established "world-class" universities can no longer be assured of the many successes if they choose to focus on just what they are good at.

Newsweek (Aug 18-25) talked on this in its special report entitled, "The race to build the next Harvard."

One of the articles in the issue, "The star students of the Islamic Republic", has this as its sub-heading: "Forget Harvard—one of the world's best undergraduate colleges is in Iran."

It went on to say that many of the US traditional ivy league universities will be facing stiff competition, if this is not already happening. It said, in 2003, the electrical engineering department of Stanford University was "startled when a group of foreign students aced the notoriously difficult Ph.D. entrance exam, getting some of the highest scores".

Reportedly, the majority came from Iran's Sharif University of Science and Technology, said to have one of the best undergraduate electrical-engineering programmes in the world.

And this university was only founded in 1965, a little earlier than Malaysia's second oldest university, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

There can be many explanations for this but the fact remains that future competition will be tough and that the prevailing pressures cannot be handled by more of the same traditional ways.

Being in a state of denial will perhaps be a sure way to make things worse. Instead, we have to build on past legacies and change to suit, better still, create the future.

Management guru Peter Drucker used to say the best way to deal with the future is to create one. Whether we like it not, the Persian Gulf area is part of the fast changing landscape of future higher education.

Contributor Zvika Krieger contends in her Newsweek article that there is a rush "to erode the dominance of Harvard, Yale and a handful of other, mainly American or British, schools".

Adds the director of the Boston-based Centre for International Higher Education: "Academic leaders are already saying that if we don't keep up, we'll be overtaken."

Some even recognise that a modern-day Andalusia of the 10th century is in the making. Learning in then Muslim Spain flourished for at least 700 years, giving rise to a European Renaissance.

Aptly, Yale president Richard Levin has said that the list of the world's top 20 universities is likely to change in the coming years.

In fact, billions are being invested in shaping a new intellectual landscape in the Gulf area. One example is the US\$10 billion (RM30.3 billion) foundation set up by the ruler of Dubai in an effort "to develop worldclass knowledge" in the region.

Others have created a multibillion-dollar science park and have embarked on huge book publishing and translating projects, and hosting prestigious seminars featuring world-renowned authorities.

All these efforts have been described as the mere tip of the iceberg.

What is sure is that these efforts will result in formidable universities of the future, devoted to addressing the pressing problems of tomorrow, many of which cannot be addressed by traditional universities.

In other words, a re-thinking is urgently required, if not a complete transformation. As reported by European Economics editor Stefan Theil, a group of leaders are rethinking how their universities should function in the

21st century.

More and more are moving away from specialised academic training towards more integrated approaches to complex, real-life problems. Given all these developments, the recent announcement of an Apex university status must be viewed as a serious attempt to move with the times.

Universiti Sains Malaysia has been given the task to lead in transforming not only itself but also that of Malaysian higher education towards a sustainable tomorrow.

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