

Keeping a tight leash on education

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HIGHER education in Malaysia is certainly growing. This is evident with the establishment of more than 500 private institutions in the country. They offer a wide variety of programmes leading to diplomas and degrees.

All this was made possible with the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act (1996). This allowed private higher education institutions to be established in a relatively liberal way.

This led to the introduction of a variety of programmes to attract more school leavers to pursue tertiary education in view of the limited places in public universities.

The private educational institutions complemented the government's efforts in significantly increasing the number of educated in the country. This was in tandem with the increasing demand for higher education, given the growing standard of living and improved family income, making private higher education more affordable.

To date, no less than 50,000 students from more than 100 countries are studying in Malaysia. The government hopes to double this figure.

It is also in line with the government's aspiration to turn Malaysia into a centre of excellence in education in the region.

Malaysia is poised to meet a similar surge in demand for higher education globally, given its strategic location, affordable cost as well as quality of education.

With modern infrastructure, facilities and expertise, the growth of private higher education is bound to continue.

Full-fledged branch campuses of foreign universities have been established in Malaysia and more are expected to be setup.

Like health care, the demand for education, too, can be an emotive one. Many want to have it but not all of them know exactly what they want. This can be complicating as a myriad of disciplines and courses are now available.

Fancy sounding names given to some of those offered add to the confusion. Like the common cold, where there is now a plethora of medicines said to provide relief, education, too, is beginning to face similar challenges.

The only difference perhaps is that the Medical Act does not allow health care or the institutions offering them to be freely advertised.

Therein lies the difference between the health and education sectors. For example, as you drive into Kuala Lumpur from the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, it would be difficult not to miss the huge billboards selling the "No 1" provider of healthcare education in the country.

In addition, there are plenty of advertisements in the media bearing claims of providing "global" this and that, or the "largest" so and so, or being the "most international", and so on. Often, all these are in big bold letters or sometimes implied in between the advertorial pages.

While such superlatives to describe the educational institutions are of course fine, they must be validated by some credible, independent or authoritative agencies.

Students are usually very impressionable and their judgment would be unduly clouded by certain dubious claims. And even if the claims are true, they beg the question whether they should be allowed.

This is because a sound education is much more than just those seemingly superficial superlatives. Moreover, words like "global education", for example, are now no more than a cliché used to promote the business of education.

So, it is not surprising to read a recent report that more than 320 advertisements paid for by some private higher educational institutions were said to contain some "false" information relating to the courses offered thus far this year.

This was revealed in a reply during question time at the Dewan Negara as to the number of such incidences.

Maybe it is time to learn from the healthcare sector where advertisements are very stringently controlled.

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