

Shaping our varsities into icons

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IF there is any indicator as to how Malaysia would fare in the next 50 years, one just needs to look at the National Higher Education Strategic Plan launched by the prime minister just before the 50th Merdeka anniversary.

Along with it is another compilation, the National Higher Education Action Plan (2007-2010).

Both documents laid out a new pathway to the future, among them:

- greater transparency in the selection of senior management;
- development of a national lifelong learning policy;
- exchange programmes where top students spend at least one semester abroad to enrich their learning experience;
- industry attachment and secondment of academics to the private sector and vice-versa; and,
- regular audits on the quality of higher education institutions, including the advancement of research and innovation.

More importantly, the documents complement the Education Ministry's National Education Blueprint 2006-2010 launched early this year, as well as taking into account the action necessary to transform institutions of higher learning within the Ninth Malaysia Plan period.



The new RM200 million campus of Monash University at Bandar Sunway, in Petaling Jaya, was officially opened last week. It's one of eight campuses operated by Monash, Australia's largest university, in three countries. Malaysia has announced comprehensive plans to transform its institutions of higher learning to meet future needs. — Bernama picture

At almost the same time, the United Nations University and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation organised an international conference aimed at further exploring the challenges and opportunities that globalisation poses to higher education.

Attention was also given to the changing scope and role of higher institutions of education to meet future challenges. This was in recognition of what was regarded as a Copernican change that has taken place with regard to the position of these institutions.

"No longer do national systems of higher education lend prestige to their constituent parts, the institutions. Rather, the opposite is true: It is the internationally acknowledged qualities of individual institutions which lend prestige to the national systems they belong to," the conference was reminded.

In other words, these institutions are now icons of the nation.

Thus, they are under intense pressure to live up to such expectations.

Far from leaving everything to the marketplace in the context of oft-quoted themes such as information and communication technology, bio- and nano-technology, these institutions must be equally concerned about integrating the new body of knowledge into issues with major impact on society.

They include ethical and value implications, cultural identity and diversity, sustainable development, nation-building and peace-building.

Just before the weekend, yet another meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur, this time the Asia-Europe Colloquium on University Governance and Management which was co-organised by the Malaysian Vice-Chancellors' Committee together with the European University Association and the Asia-Europe Foundation.

It was targeted at university leaders and senior representatives from both Asia and Europe.

This is anticipated to further enhance exchange and co-operation prospects as both regions mutually develop to meet future challenges.

Among the topics discussed were institutional autonomy and higher education funding, quality, and institutional profiling in academic, societal and economic areas.

It was noted that in response to the growing pressure generated by globalisation, governments across the world have restructured higher education to enhance global competitiveness. This can be in the form of corporatisation and privatisation of universities.

For others, the making of world-class universities is a do-or-die mission, although the concept is still largely vague and fluid.

Until today, there has yet to be a clear definition of the notion of "world-class" which is very much context-dependent. And this makes it a difficult moving target.

Nevertheless, the shotgun definition has somehow been carved out of numbers often churned out by leagues tables based on a set of indicators.

While such a notion is much less a driving force among the European institutions, this is not so for Asia.

This may be due to the fact that Asian universities are rather young and lack quality traditions and culture that can inherently assure them of their standing, nationally or internationally.

In fact, one of the keynote speakers quoted former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as saying that "most Asians have not been able to get over the feeling of inferiority that centuries of colonialism have brought in them. The desire to please non-Asians is strong among them".

The speaker thus warned that although the European and American counterparts have been regarded as more "advanced", the Asian counterparts must critically reflect on the extent and ways the so-called "good practices" identified from the West can really integrate with the non-Western education system. This is so that they can move away from the dangers of neo-imperialism in education.

This looks like good advice now that we are looking ahead after celebrating 50 years of Merdeka. In this context, too, the recently launched national plans must allow universities to be transformed into vanguards, not only of the nation, but indeed the world as a whole and the future of humanity.

For these reasons alone, they must be in the leadership position to compete and co-operate in refining an equitable global shared future, without losing their sovereignty. Only then can Malaysia be proud of its universities live up to the ideals of a university.

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