

## Varsities must fuel global demands

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Article

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### **IT was an important meeting that attracted the executive heads and vice-chancellors of Commonwealth universities from more than 50 countries in Adelaide last week.**

The Association of Commonwealth Universities, under the theme "University Futures" , debated and discussed the role of universities in ensuring future global responsibilities initiated the 'Adelaide Conversation'.

This is timely as universities are now faced with ever-increasing demands to take on new responsibilities and obligations, a debate that can be traced back to the early 70s in Southeast Asia.

Though the debate then was somewhat tuned towards economic interests, cultural and spiritual development were not neglected.

The time has come to appreciate that a university is more than just an economic investment where the main objective is to raise not only the national output, but also create good citizenry by way of enhancing the capacity and capability of its human capital.

As such, the responsibility of universities needs to be redefined again, what with the introduction of the concept of Education for Sustainable Development.

In 1975, the Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development stated that it was no longer sufficient for universities to position themselves purely for the transmission and advancement of basic knowledge. They had to shoulder a heavier burden and to re-define their role to incorporate important new functions.

It is the same today except that the "important new functions" are now vastly different with the many advances in science and technology.

Put another way, the historical notion that academics want to be left alone in the "niches" that they have created for themselves within the universities needs to be re-visited.

So, too, the trend that the Government wants a bigger say in the academic decision-making process in universities that diminishes its academic freedom.

What is required is a new balance whereby the university and Government can enter into a partnership beyond what used to be the command-and-control model.

The failure or inability to do so on the part of university and Government will inadvertently result in controversies and problems which could stifle the growth of universities.

The apparent lack of confidence shown by many government bureaucrats on the ability of academics to handle real life problems or in real time must also be revised as part of the new thinking.

So long as such gaps continue to persist, chances are the national intellectual and academic talent will not be optimally mobilised.

It is therefore important to promote indigenous knowledge and wisdom as part of global knowledge if Malaysia is keen to move up the value chain where indigenous knowledge and wisdom can be a source of inspiration.

At the same time, this demands that the rigid and out-dated administrative structures which have thus far hindered the meaningful participation by universities in innovative activities must be reviewed, replaced or restructured.

At the outset, universities must ensure that they have ample supply of good quality human/intellectual capital so that they can expand into non-traditional developmental roles, without affecting the quality and value of education.

The "brain drain", if not properly tackled, will retard growth and development, given the World Bank's Global Economic Prospects 2006 report.

The report, released recently, notes that the labour force of the high-income countries (481 million in 2001) is projected to decline to 474 million by 2025, while the labour force of developing countries is projected to rise from 2.6 billion to 3.6 billion.

In 2001, there were 25 million unskilled and three million skilled workers from developing countries in high-income countries.

The World Bank's Global Economic Prospects 2006 also noted that industrial countries have made it easy for highly skilled workers, especially IT specialists and healthcare workers, to move to industrial countries.

The trend for more skilled foreign workers was seen in a report in The Wall Street Journal Asia (March 28) on the proposal to the US Congress for the annual cap on H-1B guest worker visas for immigrants be raised from 65,000 to 115,000 in specialty fields like science and engineering.

The proposal is said to allow more foreign students become permanent residents by obtaining an advanced degree in maths, engineering, technology or physical sciences and then finding work in their field.

Unless they are adequately understood and there is a willingness to take bold steps in meeting the new demands, universities are not likely to make the grade as the universities of the future.

By not keeping up with the times, universities will lose their moral authority as critics and conscience of society.

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