

## Brains vs industrial brawn

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Beware. There can be an element of corruption when universities work with industry too closely.

International Anti-Corruption Day, organised by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), will be celebrated this Friday. The slogan for the 2005 anti-corruption campaign is "You can stop corruption".

In this context, education plays an important role but education itself can also be exposed to corrupt practices.

Recently, journalist-author Jennifer Washburn highlighted the extent of corrupt practices in her book, *University Inc: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* (Basic Books, 2005).

Washburn alleges that various form of unethical intrusions are undermining the academia, exposing it to corrupt practices, even among the most prestigious institutions of higher learning.

At the very least, it erodes the very basis of free inquiry and thus threatens independent thought which is what universities are set up for.

As long as it debilitates the education system that should be working for public good and results in the dwindling of trust, it can also be regarded as corruption according to the UNODC (<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/event2005-12-091.html>).

In other words, not all corruption can be measured in economic terms.

In many ways, this book is timely as universities, including local ones, are constantly urged to work closely with the corporate and industrial sectors in areas of research.

**RESEARCH SUCCESS:** University scientists depend on funding for their projects. Now a book claims that industry can actually harm research projects from being carried out impartially.

They are often told to emulate their American counterpart to set up close rapport with industrial partners so that not only their R&D outputs are marketable but also their graduates.

As a result, some are going headlong to work with the industry, often naively. The industry has been portrayed as a saviour of some sort, and their demands must be met by all means.

The insistence that everything must be "tailor-made" to suit the industrial needs and wants are changing the morality of education to mirror the morality of the marketplace.

In short, the industry is gradually deciding the education agenda with little disagreement from the educationists, at least in Malaysia.

But Washburn is telling a different story. Apparently, not everything about the industry is in the best interests of education, or desirable.

Too intimate a relationship between the academia and the industry can "undermine the foundation of public trust on which all universities depend".

To illustrate this, she provides ample examples of what looks like secret linkages, shady deals and even scandals at the expense of academic integrity.

The many examples provided involve well-known companies, for example one producing a widely used weed-killer.

Reportedly, the company attempted to silence the researcher at a famous US university because of a study showing unfavourable results.

The company also hired scientists at another university in the attempt to discredit the result that did not conform to its expectations.

Another example also involved a prestigious US university which signed a million-dollar long-term contract to study global climate changes.

In so doing, it chose to abdicate to the corporate sponsors the responsibility to select which research projects

should receive funding. In other words, the university was no longer free to determine the direction of its research.

There are other examples involving pharmaceutical companies. Washburn quoted one instance where a suit was slapped on a researcher after his findings concluded that the drug tested was not effective.

In yet another case, the researcher was denied tenure allegedly because he was a vocal critic of a deal between the university and the drug company.

The company apparently was given two of the five seats on the department's research committee responsible for determining how the money was to be spent.

Earlier, Derek Curtis Bok, the former president of Harvard University, cautioned against similar unethical behaviour in his book, *Universities in the Marketplace — The Commercialisation of Higher Education* (2003).

He wrote: "The hazards of accepting corporate money and involvement seem sufficiently obvious and serious to warrant stopping such support altogether.

"The likelihood of bias and the appearance of undue influence are simply too great to be tolerated."

This is especially so in medical and health education where pharmaceutical companies are spending about US\$2 billion (RM7.6 billion) every year, according to Bok, especially in times when educational resources are drying up fast.

While it is not necessarily wrong to associate with the industry and corporate sectors, it is imperative for universities not to lose sight of their public mission and responsibility.

Bok gave an example where Harvard turned down an offer of US\$1 million annually by a major pharmaceutical firm because it involved drug advertising, although the company expressly agreed to give the university final authority over matters relating to it.

This is because, despite the safeguards, "it was inappropriate to mix commercial advertising with a university's teaching".

Moreover, as argued by Washburn, rarely have recent partnerships forged between universities and commercial entities generated the financial windfall that was promised.

Thus, as one reviewer who has served as the editor-in-chief of the authoritative *New England Journal of Medicine*, noted: "If you think higher education is about the free exchange of knowledge, this book will disabuse you of that quaint notion."

Today, according to Washburn, it is about secrecy and patent monopolies and thickets of exclusive licences, and "we are all the worse for it".

Unless we are thoroughly vigilant about this, chances are corrupt practices will creep in unknowingly in our higher education sector — at all levels.

Not so long ago, there were allegations about useless courses being offered by for-profit colleges involving more than 1,000 students (NST, May 23) and there were others.

The ultimate question that needs to be asked perhaps is similar to the one posed by Barton Bernstein, a professor of history at Stanford University: "Who owns and controls university-produced knowledge?"

Who should own it and benefit from it? This must be one of the pertinent issues to mull over to ensure that the value of education continues to be in the realm of public good, rather than being dictated by vested interests serving the private sector.

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