

When education becomes business

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IN our search for educational excellence, the possibility of bogus universities offering degrees in Malaysia, as reported recently, has come as a surprise to many people.

And that there were Malaysians who graduated from these "universities" is even a bigger shock. More so now that the outgoing Irish ambassador has confirmed that the "universities" had no ties with Ireland.

Reportedly, he had forwarded the case to the Irish authorities to take action against the people behind the scam.

Similarly, the Malaysian authorities are also doing the same.

Earlier, the issue of agents recruiting local students for foreign universities was highlighted.

Allegedly this is one source of problem leading to students being enrolled in unrecognised universities overseas.

Thus, by the same token, the hiring of agents by local universities to recruit foreign students can also be problematic as most see this as no more than an economic venture.

Malaysia has had its fair share of problems with foreign students who are involved in many activities other than studying.

All this conjectures a very unsettling situation when it comes to cross-border education where quality and standards are of the utmost concern.

The situation worsens as education becomes a popular commodity to be bought and sold, sponsored by commercial enterprises that do not know (or even care) what education is all about.

For them, the learning outcome is a fat bank account and not an enlightened mind.

For some, venturing into the world of education is a lucrative tax break which they needed to support and complement the myriad of other businesses that the company is involved in.

Still others would lace it with party politics, serving a larger political interest with education only as a strategic move.

This makes the education sector highly commercialised and politicised, distracting us from the Falsafah Pendidikan Negara.

While arguably the presence of a myriad of "universities" can be a boon to Malaysians in terms of educational opportunities, it is always the curse that takes away the cake.

A case in point is perhaps the incident associated with the "plagiarism cover-up" involving a Malaysian private institution of higher learning in 2002.

While Malaysians have forgotten the incident, it is not so in Australia where the parent or partner institution is located.

Early last month, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in Australia made adverse findings against the academics (including a deputy vice-chancellor) of the Australian university involved in the cover-up, implicating 15 fee-paying students at the university's Malaysian campus.

Allegedly, all the students "graduated" after their essays were regraded from zero marks to a pass following a "warning" that to fail them could hurt recruitment, according to *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s editorial (July 2-3).

Seemingly, this is all in the interest of business at the expense of sound education.

What is worrying is that such a "warning" is not new among local academics who have been acting as external examiners for some of the private institutions locally.

Indeed, some reportedly even issued similar "warning" to their staff not to fail private fee-paying students.

While this type of "warning" is unheard of in public institutions, unfortunately some in the private sector condone it because they are associated with so-called big "brand" names overseas, including bogus ones, of late.

As to why this is so, it is worthwhile to mull over the *Herald* editorial since almost 60,000 of 210,000 foreign students educated by Australian universities are on campus outside Australia.

"The offshore operations are increasingly attractive to universities under pressure to be more financially self-reliant, though just how much money they make from the exercise is far from clear," it said.

"Whatever the returns, these operations are also fraught with danger, the plagiarism cover-up being just one possibility.

"Offshore operations involve not only unfamiliar environment but also partnerships with overseas academic and commercial organisations that may have different agendas and standards to that of their Australian partners.

"Accountability and control are harder from a distance; when things go wrong, it is that much more difficult to set them right.

"Money can be lost, teaching standards subverted and reputations damaged, as a number of Australian universities have already discovered."

Increasingly, this is mutually felt in Malaysia as well.

Not too long ago, many foreign universities wanted to offer their programmes locally but insisted on giving a degree different to that issued by the parent university, despite claiming the programmes are identical in all respects.

The reason was they could not accredit offshore programmes and, thus, were unsure of the quality.

Currently, the opposite is being argued, namely since the programmes are identical to that of the parent university, there is then no need for local accreditation any more.

This time the insistence is for fast-tracking, setting them apart from the local private institutions.

But as the editorial noted: "The universities' offshore endeavours are still largely hidden, emerging only when something goes disastrously awry (again as epitomised by the plagiarism scandal, thanks to the counterpart overseas).

"Universities fail to differentiate their offshore operations from the wider operations in their published reports, or hide them behind commercial-in-confidence provisions — masking how they operate academically and financially."

The message is clear enough. We must not be gullible in opening our doors to foreign universities, some of which are here for the money under the guise of offering sound education.

If Malaysia still aspires to be the hub of educational excellence, it is time to consolidate the education sector with a moratorium on the mushrooming of universities.

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