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Managing Private Institutions of Higher Learning

An interview with the Deputy Director General of
the Department of Higher Education Management
(Private Higher Education)

Munir Shuib & Shukran Abdul Rahman

Priate Higher Education in Malaysia is an important component for nation building and has contributed enormously to the development of the country and its human capital. It acts as an important economic contributor to the country and provides employment opportunities for its citizens.

Today, Malaysia is witnessing the emergence of many new private institutions of higher learning comprising colleges, university colleges and universities. The country boasts 559 private institutions of higher learning including 11 universities, 11 university colleges, five foreign branch campuses and 532 colleges.

Private institutions of higher learning serve a key national asset to the country so much so that the government has given great attention to their development and performance. The Ministry of Higher Education, entrusted to look into this matter, has set up a special section called Private Institutions of Higher Learning Management Sector, which is placed under the Department of Higher Education. Its primary role is to develop the private higher education industry.



The Private Institutions of Higher Learning Management Section is headed by the Deputy Director General of Department of Higher Education Management (Private Higher Education Institutions) whose current incumbent is Professor Dr. Mahani Zainal Abidin, a professor at Department of Economics, University of Malaya. Specialising in Economic Development and Trade, Mahani was appointed a member of the National Economic Action Council (NEAC) during the country's economic downturn in 1998 and had later served as Head of Globalisation Consultancy Team in the council. Her successes in spearheading the country to assist

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and solve various global economic changes convinced the government to further second her to the Ministry of Higher Education in 2004, serving in the current post.

As the Deputy Director General of the sector, Mahani oversees the management of private educational institutions which offer post secondary education programmes. This sector's major functions include regulating the educational services provided by private institutions of higher learning by ensuring that they provide quality academic programmes, practice good management system, enhance and develop their competitiveness, as well as ensuring the welfare of their students; regulating the pre-establishment stage of private institutions of higher learning, ensuring that they meet the minimum requirements for establishment and ascertaining that the programmes are approved by the National Board of Accreditation and encouraging private institutions of higher learning to adopt continuous improvement efforts so as to make them competitive and relevant in Malaysian and international markets.

The sector has two major divisions: Registration and Standard Division and Enforcement and Inspectorate Division. The Registration and Standard Division's functions are primarily to process the approval of the establishment of private institutions of higher learning, register the institutions and their teaching personnel, and verify and recommend to the government for the establishment of foreign branch campuses. The Enforcement and

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Inspectorate Division's functions are primarily to ensure that the private institutions adhere to the rules and regulations as stipulated by Act 555. In addition, the division deals with comments and queries from the public and beneficiaries of private institutions of higher learning through its Complaints and Inspection Unit.

As a continuous effort to improve private higher education in Malaysia, Mahani stated that Act 555 was being reviewed so as to meet current needs of higher education stakeholders, not only in Malaysia but the region as well. The review would allow private education programmes and services to be exported abroad, and promote their compliances to international standards. The review, according to her, "will strengthen the structure of private higher education institutions, which is expected to help them prepare to meet the increasing challenges in the industry".

The challenges confronting the Malaysian private higher education, according to Mahani, are both internal and external in nature. Internal challenges include low number of students in some of the private institutions and insufficient funds. External challenges include the fast

changing and dynamic nature of higher education industry and keen demands from job markets for skilled workforce. On top of these, there are international challenges. Neighbouring countries, for instance, are putting enormous effort to make themselves the hub of higher education in the region, thus forcing the local private higher education institutions to innovate to remain competitive.

Despite the numerous challenges, private institutions of higher learning, with the help of the sector, are expected to continue to provide access to higher education for many years to come complementing the role of public institutions of higher learning. As Mahani pointed out, "public institutions are limited in number" and "the future growth in higher education is going to be with the private institutions".

There is thus a need for positive and constructive engagements between the sector and the private higher education. The establishment of the sector is expected to play a vital role in addressing the issues and concerns of all the parties involved and ensuring that the emerging private education sector in Malaysia is effective, well managed and serves the national goals.