

# Strategy to take varsities forward

Public institutions of higher learning have to find new ways to fund and keep themselves relevant.

By **PROF DATUK AHMAD IBRAHIM**

UNIVERSITIES in the country have been under a lot of pressure lately. Public universities, for example, have seen big cuts in their budgets by up to 20 to 30%.

Their research funding has been subjected to even bigger reduction of around 70%.

This has led to some layoffs of many experienced academics including professors of established repute.

This is a huge loss to the research agenda of the higher institutions and a major setback for the nation.

Private universities have also not been spared.

They too face intense competition in securing enough students to fund their operations.

Many private universities have reported a steep decline in student numbers.

There is a serious concern for institutions that are unable to attract enough students, and they may see challenging times ahead.

Unless the shortage can be made up by foreign students, many such institutions may not survive.

There is also a growing concern that the quality of graduates has shown a decline.

They do not seem to match the needs of industry. As a result, the number of unemployed graduates continues to rise.

There should be a serious rethink about the operation of universities, both public and private, if they are to survive such challenges and to truly make Malaysia the educational hub of the region. The universities need a Blue Ocean Strategy approach.

For years, the universities have often been criticised for being hesitant to shake off their ivory tower image.

They have not been integrating well with the community

around them and the industry.

Though attempts have been made in recent years to address these shortcomings, the outcome is still poor.

The government has initiated a number of schemes such as public private research network and others, but the response has been rather lukewarm.

There is still minimal engagement between the industry and universities, not only in pursuing the nation's innovation agenda, but also in making the university curriculum more in tune with the many needs of industry.

Yet, if we listen to discussions on the future of the global economy, many have cited the lack of industry-relevant talent and skills as a major stumbling block to growth.

In fact, this is exactly what has been ailing the Japanese economy.

They are short of the right talent that industry needs. At the same time, we hear of growing public disenchantment over the pursuit of university education in a scenario where a degree no longer guarantees jobs.

What then, is the recipe for change?

How should universities reconfigure their operations in the face of such challenges?

Some universities have been toying with a number of new ideas to take themselves forward.

Whatever the ideas, a major consideration should be how universities can effectively fund their existence.

How can they be sustainable? Because of the rising costs of higher education, govern-

ment funding in many countries has been reduced, not just in Malaysia, but also elsewhere.

Unless taxes are raised, as in some European Union countries where university education is free, there is no way the government can go back to the earlier rate of subsidies.

Gone are the days of public universities being fully subsidised. They have to find new ways to generate revenue.

One idea which has gained a lot of traction among university planners is to transform universities into knowledge enterprises.

It is time universities capitalise on their knowledge assets to deliver real value to society and industries around them – and not just knowledge for the mere sake of more knowledge.

The blue ocean thinking is that if the community around the universities derives value from the knowledge assets of the universities, this will instil greater confidence in the value offered in higher education.

Then, the appreciation of university education will automatically increase.

Assets such as engineering knowledge should be extended to help small and medium-sized enterprises improve their productivity and business.

Whilst assets in medical science should be exploited to improve the health challenges of the community, there are many other assets which can be put to good use for society.

These can include legal knowledge, education as well as social science expertise.

By doing so, universities will be seen more as a higher learning enterprise.

The ultimate outcome will be

an increase in the number of people who are convinced of the value of higher education, which in effect would mean more students.

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