

Benefits to gain from sharing labs

RECENT years have witnessed a big jump in the number of private universities in our country, so much so that they have now surpassed the number of public universities.

Unlike public universities which are almost fully funded by the Government, private universities operate on their own funds.

As a result, private universities have become adept at juggling the income they get from student fees with the expenditure they need to deliver their programmes efficiently.

Unlike their public counterparts, private universities cannot afford to run programmes which do not give reasonable returns on investment. They therefore have to put in place judicious accounting and management practices to conduct their courses.

Despite such cost pressures, some private universities have been able to deliver their academic programmes effectively. In fact, over the years, many graduates of private universities have been much sought after by industry. In other words, some private universities in Malaysia have emerged as top universities in this country.

The best part is that they operate with no direct support from the Government. This means the country has been able to produce the much needed talent with much reduced public support.

Many countries have recognised this unique role of private universities in driving their higher education agenda. Some countries have helped out through a better taxation regime and giving special rates on utilities and land rentals.

This is because most of these countries realise that private universities have helped to reduce the cost of producing talents for the nation. And because they have to operate under such constraints, private universities are more accountable and cost-efficient.

Lately, due to cuts in financial support, public universities in Malaysia are increasingly turning to private universities for tips on how to better manage their finances. There have been visible changes

in the way new courses are introduced as well in public universities. There is now more talk on whether there is market demand for such courses before they are submitted for MQA endorsement.

More attention is also being given to the costs involved in delivering such courses. This is healthy for the country as it struggles to manage rising expenditure on higher education.

Notwithstanding the above, a bigger issue before us is how to effectively tap on the growing number of young talented academics in the private universities. It would be a waste if such talents are not beneficially exploited for the long-term interest of the country.

Take research and development (R&D) as an example. If we do a quick census on the talents available in private universities, it will immediately become clear that there are many within their academic population who can offer constructive R&D for the nation.

However, since they are privately run and are profit-driven, investments on laboratory facilities, especially the more sophisticated and costly equipment, are not given high priority. The reason is simple – they just cannot afford it.

At the same time, the Government has, over the years, spent a lot of money on such equipment in public universities. The market talk is that most of these expensive items are not fully utilised. And worse still, most are not well maintained. As a result, most of the equipment do not last as long as they should. It is common knowledge that most have become white elephants.

There is a need to rethink the management of government science laboratories in the country.

Many countries have practised shared laboratory facilities not only to optimise costs but also to achieve better maintenance and management. This is so that they can be accessible at reasonable charges to all researchers, including those in private institutions.

In the United States, for example, the government has long run the shared model of R&D facilities. The US government has invested in a number of laboratories focusing on key technology areas such as energy, health and biotechnology.

All such laboratories are tendered to private research management companies which are run by professionals. They are business-driven and generate income by selling their laboratory services, which include the rental of expensive equipment.

Through these arrangements, the facilities are well maintained and, more important, scientists from private universities are able to gain access to such facilities, allowing them to undertake research which benefits the nation.

We should seriously consider this model of shared laboratories.

**PROFESSOR DATUK DR AHMAD
IBRAHIM**
Fellow Academy of Sciences
Malaysia
UCSI University