

CrossTalk

You have to trawl for varsity seats

Education is always a hot topic and former journalist Juhaidi Yean Abdullah and medical doctor Noorhaire Nordin, who is doing his PhD, with SONIA RAMACHANDRAN sitting in, have lots to say

MEDICAL SEATS

Dr Noorhaire: Although the country needs more doctors, many students want to be doctors. Medical seats are limited in public universities and because of this, there will be those who will be left out even if they meet the criteria.

Juhaidi: I have two observations. First, we agree that there is shortage of places because of the quotas set by public institutions of higher education. This also indicates the number of lecturers we have and the facilities we can provide for medical students.

I know the Higher Education Ministry is trying to ease this situation. One is to arrange with more universities around the world to allocate places for Malaysian students studying medicine or taking up pharmacy.

These two, are of course, like the most prized courses for students.

The point I'm trying to make is that this is not in isolation and the government is aware of this and is doing its best to resolve the situation.

Another observation is that when I was in the ministry, I sometimes noted that it is not the student who wants to go into medicine or pharmacy.

The pressure comes from the parents, grandparents and uncles, who are also doctors and come from a particular university, and they want their child, grandchild, nephew or niece to go to that university and do that particular course.

It is unfair but some uncertain students happen to obtain good results so the option is open to them.

Noorhaire: You often hear people saying that we want to be the education hub of this region but basically we lack the facilities and manpower.

Juhaidi: We certainly can. I know there are efforts being made towards that. The mission is for Malaysia to be a centre for educational excellence in the region.

This policy is part of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan up to 2020 and beyond. Frankly, it is going to

take a lot of effort.

Maybe it is going to take longer than 2020. I say this because there are serious impediments in meeting this target.

You mentioned facilities. Many universities, if you ask them, are going to tell you they want more.

Another area would be the quality of lecturers. To be a hub of educational excellence, you must have quality teaching staff and lecturers, administrators.

According to the strategic plan, we should have 60 per cent of lecturers at local universities with PhDs by 2010.

Where are we? 2010 is only next year. There are more than 20 universities in this country.

Do all the universities have a teaching staff with more than 60 per cent being PhD holders? I doubt it.

UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH

Four universities have been made research universities, which brings us to the issue of the number of researchers and the allocation given to them for research purposes.

Is it enough? If you ask them, I am sure they will say "yes" to more resources.

There is also the question of citations for the work done by your university and researchers in journals. Is that there already?

One problem of developing a research sector in our universities is that we need to attract



THE GOVERNMENT HAS ALREADY PROVIDED THE MONEY, BUT WHERE IS THE OUTPUT FROM THE UNIVERSITIES. (WHERE ARE THE PEOPLE?) IF WE HAVE THE PEOPLE, THEN WE CAN SEND THEM. NOT MANY COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD CAN PROVIDE THIS KIND OF MONEY. THIS IS A GOOD TIME FOR ANYONE WHO WANTS TO STUDY.

— Juhaidi Yean Abdullah



Juhaidi Yean Abdullah (right) and Noorhaire Nordin discuss the state of education in this country.

the best researchers but being the best, they are more attracted to universities with an excellent reputation in research productivity and can pay them more.

In addition to having 60 per cent of the teaching staff being PhD holders, research universities must also have an equal number as researchers.

I think these are issues and impediments.

Noorhaire: Why grants? Why not pump in the funds straight to the researchers?

Juhaidi: These are separate allocations for researchers and various grants like the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme and the Technofund.

Since it is a policy that 60 per cent of the teaching staff must have PhDs, it then becomes incumbent for all universities to send their teaching staff to complete their PhDs.

I think RM1.2 billion was set aside in the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) for this goal. The amount should be enough to educate 6,500 to 7,000.

I think all 23 universities send about 150 employees to do their PhDs a year.

Noorhaire: That is a small number.

Juhaidi: RM1.2 billion can finance up to 7,000. The 9MP ends next year. To get 6,000 PhDs, how many more plans do we need?

Maybe three or four more

plans. That's why we keep on missing the target.

STRATEGIC PLAN

Noorhaire: Shouldn't there be strategic planning for our higher learning then?

Juhaidi: There was one launched by former prime minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in 2007. It was a comprehensive strategic plan.

It was comprehensive because it encompasses strategies to achieve those targets that we have set.

It was the work of many experts in the ministry, public institutions of higher learning and also the private sector and industry.

As a paper, it was comprehensive. It's a question of implementation now. They remain targets.

You hit one and miss nine. To be fair, it is not because of lack of want or trying.

For example, the government has already provided the money, but where is the output from the universities. *Mana orangnya?* (Where are the people?) If we have the people, then we can send them.

Not many countries in the world can provide this kind of money. This is a good time for anyone who wants to study.

Noorhaire: Our education system is supposed to be based on meritocracy but you still hear of those top students who miss out on university spots.

Every year, you hear these grouses.

Juhaidi: This is an issue of supply and demand. There are simply not enough places. By merit, we need to give places to students with the best results.

Let's say you take a university with any of the top courses. Say someone wants to do medicine in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. They can only take in, say, 250.

Those who qualify may be more than 250. If the university opens its doors to maybe 500, then it is stretching its resources by half.

That means there will be classes where lecturers don't turn up. So a university would do an audit and limit the number of students for each course.

On the part of the ministry, to reduce disappointment, the system was changed. In the



ON POLARISATION, I SEE GAPS BETWEEN DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS IN CERTAIN UNIVERSITIES. SOMETIMES I GIVE TUTORIALS AND I SEE THE MALAYS IN THE BACK ROW AND THE CHINESE IN THE FRONT ROW. THEY DON'T MIX.

— Dr Noorhaire Nordin

past, when you are rejected, that's it.

TRAWLING FOR PLACES

Now if you cannot enter the university of your first choice, your name automatically goes into the name of the second choice and then the third choice and so on until you land a spot. That is why now all students are given many choices.

The onus on the parents and students is to really know what course to take in which university.

Don't limit yourself to saying "I want medicine in Universiti Malaysia, medicine in UKM, medicine in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), medicine, medicine..." for all the universities.

You may be on the borderline for each university. That means you are out, brother. You can't go into any university because you haven't cast your net.

Likewise, you don't put medicine in UM, architecture in UM, biology in UM.

They cannot send you elsewhere and each time they rank you, you are on the borderline.

STUDY LOAN FUND

I also think the model for student funding in Malaysia, the National Higher Education Fund Corporation, is heading for disaster. The country can go bankrupt if you don't change the model.

When the first idea came up,

it was to give financial assistance to rural Malay students. Very quickly, that changed to assistance for rural and urban Malays in public institutions of higher learning.

The argument was that there were also poor Malays in the city. Next it was opened to non-Malays in public universities and colleges only.

After that, a decision was made to include everyone.

When I left the ministry in 2006, we were looking at about RM15.5 billion disbursed to 900,000 students from 1997. Repayment was only about 30 per cent.

Next year we will probably be looking at about RM20 to RM21 billion. I think by 2015, it might well be RM30 or RM40 billion.

Of course, there is repayment but the shortfall is still big. The existing model cannot be sustained.

Noorhaire: Should there be a "revolution" in the higher education system?

Juhaidi: Yes. It must be a conscious effort. The strategic plan is quite revolutionary in a sense because there was nothing like that in the past.

When I was in the Higher Education Ministry and we meet students, often only four issues were raised. The most important was money. Students always had no money.

Number two was the issue of polarisation; three was politics in the campus, and the fourth was unemployment.

I would like to hear your experience with money? How did you mix with your friends?

Throughout your years in the university, were you politically aware?

And are many of your friends still jobless? I was with a group of students, and they were asking me a lot of things about how I had gone into business.

Later, I asked if they were taking entrepreneurship courses. They said yes but they also said the courses were absolutely of no use.

They were about to graduate but had no idea where to get a loan, and how to start a business.

Noorhaire: Regarding money, I think it is up to the individual spending pattern. I had a full scholarship from the Public Service Department.

That scholarship funded my entire degree. I never asked my mother for anything.

It's how you save and spend. I see now it is more about image. For me, appearances don't mean anything. What is useful is substance.

The same goes for money. We should not buy things to impress others.



Noorhaire Nordin, 35, a medical doctor from Kota Baru, graduated from Universiti Sains Malaysia, in 1998. He is currently pursuing his doctorate in epidemiology and statistics in Universiti Malaya



Juhaidi Yean Abdullah, 49, was a journalist for eight years. He was a press secretary to former higher education minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed from 2004 to 2006. Juhaidi is now a restaurateur

Juhaidi: Yeah, I use a RM100 phone (laughing). But students now have the more sophisticated phones.

Noorhaire: On polarisation, I see gaps between different ethnic groups in certain universities.

Sometimes I give tutorials and I see the Malays in the back row and the Chinese in the front row. They don't mix.

I did my degree in Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Krian, and we mixed around and had no problems. We had discussion groups together and during our community projects, we were paired with different races.

I don't know where things went wrong. After I graduated, I worked in Malacca Hospital with many Chinese doctors.

To me, there were no problems in terms of communication. In fact I can speak Cantonese. I learnt from them. We used to go out together and have discussions together.

Juhaidi: Do you think the module on ethnic relations has helped?

Noorhaire: Theoretically, it is very good. Practically, I am not sure.

On politics, I was aware of that on campus, but I never got involved with any party.

Some of my friends took sides but if they talked about politics or who they favoured, a few of us would just cut the topic off. We just wouldn't talk

about that. It's easier that way as we all come from different backgrounds, with different aims and different determinations.

STUDENTS AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Juhaidi: Is unemployment still a serious issue?

The government is helping with training, matching universities with industries, and the Human Resources Ministry giving its full support. Has that helped? Is it still a big issue?

Noorhaire: Actually, those kind of things are just complementary to what a student has to do. I don't have this problem because the job is already there for me but looking at friends and relatives, I feel they are not trying very hard.

Jobs are there. This is the technological age, where we have the Internet. There is also the newspaper. Someone I know who has a degree does not have a job.

The problem is he does not want to read the paper or surf the Net. He does not think of the future and does not anticipate things.

When you don't think about the future and are not serious about getting a job, and you're complacent, there is no motivation to find a job.

There are jobs out there, you just need to make an effort to land one.

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(From left) Selangor commissioner Datuk Dr Hasan Ali, secretary-general Datuk Kamaruddin Jaffar, deputy spiritual leader Datuk Haron Din, spiritual adviser Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang and deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa at the 55th PAS muktamar in Shah Alam.

Is this Pas' hint it wants to go solo?

DATUK Seri Abdul Hadi Awang's offer in his presidential speech yesterday that Pas "leads and carries the mandate" to rule after the next general election is open to interpretations.

It may put the smile on the faces of the party faithful, who think Pas is now ready to lead and their president will be the next prime minister.

It can also cause uneasiness among its allies.

Pas is the second largest political party in terms of membership after Umno but the opposition alliance Pakatan Rakyat, in which Parti Keadilan Rakyat and DAP are the other components, is being led by PKR.

Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who is de facto PKR leader and parliamentary opposition leader, has always been accepted as the most likely candidate to be prime minister should Pakatan take over the Federal Government.

While Pas has the biggest network and a well-organised election machinery, the party remains the smallest of the three opposition parties in Parliament, holding 24 of Pakatan Rakyat's 82 seats. PKR has 31, while DAP, despite being the smallest, has 28 seats.

"Pas is ready to offer itself to lead the change and bear the trust of national leadership in Malaysia's multiracial society after the 13th general elec-



tion," Hadi said in his speech themed "Pas leading change" when opening the party's 55th muktamar in Shah Alam.

Pas members, now standing close to one million, have long hoped the 57-year-old party would lead the country.

There have been voices from the grassroots that Pas, with its experience and strength, should break away from the opposition alliance, as they believe the party can make it on its own.

Such arguments were heard at last year's muktamar or general assembly, and is likely to be repeated when delegates debate the president's speech today.

But the hard-line ulama toned down when pressed by reporters about his plan for Pas to become the opposition's leading party and towards the post of prime minister if it wins enough seats in the next general election, saying the alliance practised collective leadership.

"The political scenario can change. What's important is principle and cooperation, not defending any individuals," Hadi said.

On Thursday, a delegate at the Youth assembly called for Pas to be at the forefront in the

opposition coalition.

The delegate, Yasir Mat Desa from Perlis, disagreed strongly with outgoing Pas youth chief Salahuddin Ayub's suggestion that Pas complement its allies to strengthen the coalition.

"Hadi is setting the direction on how to move ahead in terms of setting higher goals for the next general election," says Yang Razali Kassim, senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore.

DAP elections strategist Liew Chin Tong says the overall message of the speech was clear, that Pas is committed to Pakatan Rakyat.

He did not rule out some delegates interpreting it as Pas wanting to be in charge should Pakatan oust Barisan Nasional in 2013.

Yang Razali says: "I think Hadi knows that the political reality is such that Pas has to grow in the context of a multiracial setting. But he seems to want Pas to build up its own strength."

That Pas is gearing itself up to be the strongest party in the next general election, even to the point of being strong enough to provide national leadership is clear.

What is not clear is whether this aim is to be achieved through the Pakatan opposition coalition, or on its own.

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If we protect industries all the time, then they will remain a baby all the time.

— Datuk Dr Mohamed Ariff
MIER executive director

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