

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 basic^{ly}, 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.

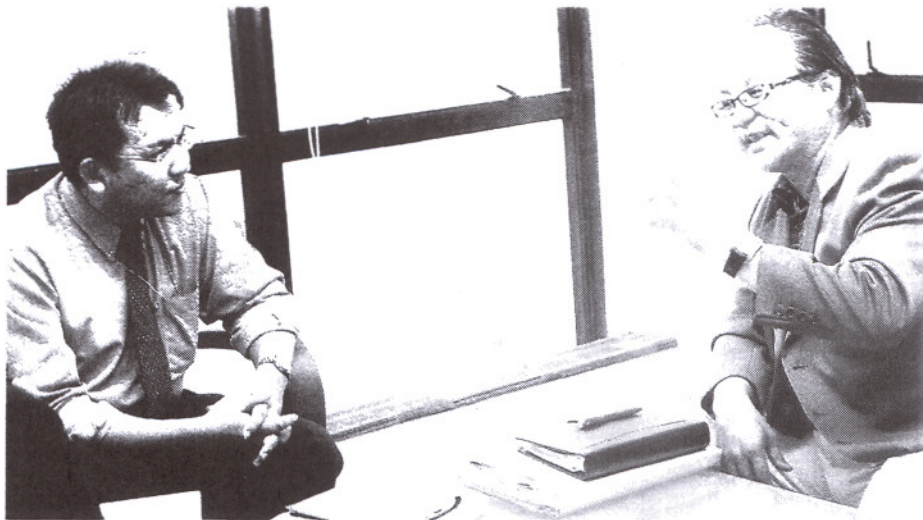
There is also the question of citations for the work done by your university and researchers in journals. Is that there already?

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 Malaya, medicine in UKM, medicine in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), medicine, 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,