The emergent mission of varsities

CHALLENGE: Wealth creation has become a necessity owing to rising pressure of higher education costs.

PUBLIC and private institutions of higher learning work hard to be relevant by linking with community and industry. To this end a network of concepts is formulated and a language and conceptual register common to higher-education institutions is developed.

Within the register, higher education institutions map out their strategic plans, typically connected to the plans and blueprints of education at school and higher education levels as well as to the broader national development plans.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) also initiate and engage in leading or participating in regional or global networks of scholars, universities or research projects.

The government and industry engagement typically include staff attachments in industry, (beyond the sabbatical taken by academicians), and student internships and international experiences, industry-based research and industry based projects.

Collaborations involve government agencies, government linked companies, local private companies, non-governmental organisations, multinational companies and small and medium enterprises. The knowledge transfer involves consultancy, education, training, research, and sharing of facilities.

With varying degrees of emphasis, universities focus on students seen as customers, learners, scholars or future leaders who would be agents of change.

Whatever the emphasis, all universities would not neglect the agenda of quality and excellence. Also, in order to function effectively with no conflict with authorities, universities would adopt a policy of compliance to all regulatory instructions.

There are interesting advances regarding teaching methods in use which include project-based teaching, problem-based teaching, problem solving, inquiry-discovery problem solving approaches, learner-centred teaching and values-based teaching. Research universities, more than other universities, are expected to use research-based teaching.

Values that are identified in institutional and programme development include integrity, ethics, transparency, accountability, autonomy, empowerment, scholarly engagement, democratic participation, inclusiveness, caring, meaningful collaboration and partnerships, efficiency, impact, capacity building, creativity, innovativeness, knowledge generation, knowledge management and distributed leadership.

Worldwide and in Malaysia the cost of education is rising. The question, therefore, is whether and when public universities can be self-sufficient and self-funding.

The funds needed to run a large public university can be as high as over RM1.5 billion a year. A large percentage of the costs would go to salaries of academic and administrative staff and facilities for students.

Maintenance costs of grounds, buildings, facilities, amenities and equipment constitute an important component of the expenditure.

Whether leaders of public universities have thought about or are prepared for such eventualities is not about practical mindsets but is about imagining the possibilities of transformations.

The possibilities can only be realised when the income generating and wealth creation agenda of a university functions successfully.

The income generating agenda would depend on the effective engagement of university with industry, businesses, the government and communities collaborating on research development, innovation and commercialisation.

The income generation agenda would be evidenced by the various funds in the foundations of the
Alumni’s role in wealth creation efforts at varsities

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universities or colleges. The alumni are expected to assist the universities in their wealth creation efforts. All higher education institutions engage in teaching, research, publications, consultancy, and community service.

Within each of these areas there would be niche areas of engagement such as education, tourism, energy, green technology and environment, waste management, pharmaceuticals and health.

Also the niche areas develop Centres of Excellence which generate and disseminate knowledge and drive transformations towards the betterment of communities, societies and even contribute towards humanity and contemporary civilisation.

In their role as the guardian of high culture and the generation of knowledge for civilisation survival, universities would take initiatives to formulate various programmes and establish centres to build knowledge corpus.

One of the popular initiatives is to create interest in building local knowledge and wisdom and local knowledge repository.

The awareness of corporate social responsibility lead universities to address the local and global challenges of poverty, diseases, drug and human trafficking.

Various opportunities would be provided to disadvantaged individuals and marginalised groups through the establishment of policies and initiatives which celebrate diversity and provide access to higher education, promoting the policy of the democratisation of higher education.

The expansion of higher education in Malaysia has created unprecedented opportunities to Malaysians and non-Malaysians across the human lifespan, to develop human potentialities and talents, acquire skills in a wide range of knowledge disciplines in multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary ways.

Leading the silent and significant transformation of higher education are Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

As the enlightened graduate learners participate in the activities of society, there are higher aspirations and expectations and higher standards are being established increasingly in all domains of life.

The writer is president Malaysian Association for Education

Why FB makes monsters of regular Malaysians

IMPERSIONAL: The flip side of a vibrant social media sees many assume alter egos of Jekyll and Hyde personas

On Nov 21 last year, I got engaged. My family and my fiancee’s had a small get-together at a restaurant in Petaling Jaya. Everything was going swimmingly until about an hour later, when my sister suddenly realised that her handbag had gone missing.

She quickly turned on me and we later reviewed the closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage and found that a group of foreign-looking men had whisked it away from our table just as our two families were busy taking a group photo.

While the incident did dampen the occasion somewhat, it was what happened afterwards that made things interesting.

My brother had posted the CCTV footage on Facebook as a reminder to the public to exercise caution and to learn from our mistake. Apart from the usual flood of messages of sympathy and shock on his posting, one stood out. One person, whom neither family knew, responded with this brief comment:

“Serves you guys right for not practising common sense.”

Ouch.

While the comment was fair and we did, perhaps, deserve it for not exercising caution, it was nevertheless puzzling, especially coming from someone whom neither family even knew. It raises the question — what is it about social networking sites that transforms otherwise well-adjusted individuals into people who are suddenly capable of throwing social norms out the window?

John Suler, Professor of Psychology at Rider University in New Jersey, has a term for such behavioural changes. He calls it the “online disinhibition effect”.

In a nutshell, it is a loosening, or in some cases, a complete abandonment of social restrictions and inhibitions. In his view, it can stem from a variety of reasons, including a perceived sense of anonymity as well as minimisation of authority.

For many of us, social media enable us to shed common decency that would otherwise be present in normal face-to-face interactions.

If I were seated at a table with strangers at a function, for example, I probably wouldn’t comment on a couple’s child running amok inside the hall. I’d sigh, give the kid an evil eye or two, but probably reserve any comments for the gossip session later amidst more familiar company.

But, given the same scenario on social media, chances are a video of the child running amok would be met with an angry throwaway comment for the parent, along the lines of “you should get a vasectomy.”

People say these things because they believe that there are no consequences to their actions. On the surface, it is puzzling, as one would think that, given that such comments are aired in a public setting, one would be more careful about what they say.

Social commentator Mark Mahfuz, in his insightful piece, amusingly titled “Why people are such “**” on the Internet”, observed that people say offensive things on the Internet simply “because they can, and that they feel it doesn’t matter”.

Sigmund Freud made the argument that for society to exist, man’s worst impulses — violence, selfishness, inappropriate sexuality — must be kept in check.

Manns in recent times that the Internet is possibly the first mechanism in human history which allows society to not only exist, but also thrive, by removing the need for self-censorship.

“With no consequences and less efficient communication, people are rewarded for the shock value of what they say, as much as the content and meaning,” he wrote.

This rings true in Malaysia as well, where a vibrant social media scene has seen a rise in similar phenomena. Browse through the Facebook pages of any person and you would be crammed under the avalanche of vitriol and animosity being traded back and forth in the comments section.

The volume is unsurprising, given that Malaysia is an incredibly connected country, with more than half of our 30 million population wired to the Internet.

We also have a Jekyll and Hyde persona, given that our Asian heritage means we’re polite and capable of being civil in person, but are also able to become incredibly judgmental people when in control of a keyboard.

Chances are, things aren’t about to get better anytime soon. Teens aged between 15 and 19 make up the most 15 per cent of the country’s Internet users. As of 2014, there were 10.4 million Facebook users in Malaysia, of which 3.5 million are those aged between 21 and 24.

The social behaviour that is becoming the norm will unfortunately continue well into the next generation. Any effort to address this won’t be a short-term fix.

Like everyone else, Malaysia has a long way to go until it eventually comes around to the idea that all actions have consequences. In the meantime, we just have to remind ourselves (and our online alter egos) to be a little more patient and understanding, and to be less judgmental.

More often than not, that very “idiot” on the other side of the screen is usually the same person you’d be more than happy to have a tek talk with.

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