

Work together in higher education

WE have been following with interest *The Star's* recent coverage on public and private institutes of higher learning (IHLs) – relevance, effects of budget cuts, etc. – including Monday's letter from three bright and accomplished USM lecturers, "Public universities still the top choice".

We would like to share our opinion that often times we tend to pit public and private universities against each other. The reality is that questions such as "which is better, public or private institutions?" or "which one is the way forward?" are irrelevant and largely driven by under-substantiated facts and perceptions.

Both have their respective strengths and weaknesses, their individual merits and opportunities for improvement, and there is huge variation in best practices and experiences. Rather than focus on the differences, we should be talking about how these public and private IHLs should collaborate and complement each other.

Many private IHLs in this country have public IHL DNA. Many were established or pioneered by

public IHL academics or graduates (one of the writers has even served in both public and private IHLs). However, for far too long, public and private IHLs have co-existed in isolation, with only limited sharing of ideas and resources, resulting in limited co-evolution.

While public IHLs have produced high-performing individuals who can compete at international level, the Government's long-standing generous patronage has lulled the motivation for cross-pollination.

The "inbreeding" has led to the perceived elitism and the engendering of legacies that hamper their ability to innovate quickly and respond to stochastic changes.

In contrast, their relatively "younger" cousin, the private IHLs, have had to cope with a less-protected environment and thus have been driven to acquire the ability to be more flexible and innovative to survive.

However, the main evolutionary driver of the private IHLs has largely been capitalism/economics and not necessarily nation-building. As a result, many private IHLs

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are hamstrung by the pressures to maximise profit-loss margins, including generating fast-track programmes to make up the numbers.

Often, when two species that have migrated along individual evolutionary paths are brought together by factors beyond their control, there can be two possible outcomes:

- a) conflict that leads to the death of one or both species; or
- b) cross-fertilisation that allows both species to co-exist symbiotically, leading to greater benefit to not just the interacting species.

In the context of a more challenging economic reality, while the

fittest will survive, fitness will not only be determined by the individual institution's ability to cope but how best it is able to build symbiotic networks with other institutions. More importantly, the academic and career fitness of the graduates of IHLs will be key in ensuring the competitive fitness of the society and country in the fourth industrial revolution and beyond.

Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh in January 2016 spoke of the need to enhance public and private IHL collaboration through a "Collegiality and Commonalities" concept.

Positive responses to this call for greater collaboration include the formation of the South Klang Valley University Network consisting of both public (USIM, UKM, UPM) and private (IUKL, Uniten, UniKL, CUCMS) IHLs.

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu has also entered into an MOU with Taylor's University to strengthen human resource management.

In his 2017 Policy Speech, the minister repeated this call and spoke of the need to expand collaboration to include government

agencies and the private sector.

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We also believe that the increased autonomy in the management of public IHLs is a step in the right direction to reduce cost inefficiencies, enhance income generation and improve resource allocation.

We believe that all these efforts can only benefit and bring about a more sustainable, creative and innovative Malaysian higher education system that thrives in the global education landscape.

While keeping our feet rooted on the ground to overcome our limitations, let us also celebrate the amazing progress that has happened and the ample opportunities we have now to chart our own careers and lives.

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