

# Public universities still the top choice

WITH reference to your reports under the heading "Are private universities the way forward?" (*Sunday Star*, Jan 15), we must humbly disagree. We believe that for most parents, public university education is still the top choice. Although there are some good private universities coming up, in general terms we think that public universities are still offering some of the best courses and educational environment for students.

Every year, competition for entry into public universities is very tight. For some courses, even candidates with 4.0 scores are not chosen to enrol in the course of their choice. UM and USM, like other universities, are concise about entrance requirements. Prospective candidates for various courses are interviewed by faculty deans and senior lecturers to ensure "quality control" in addition to paper qualifications. With this more stringent selection process, these universities filter candidates, ensuring that enrolled undergraduates are somewhat more balanced besides being academically strong.

Graduates from Malaysia's top universities are always highly sought after. Many also go on to further their studies at the best institutions in the world and have done very well. Hafizah Noor Isa who graduated from UTM is simple proof that Malaysian public university products are indeed well trained. Many are also pursuing post-doctoral careers in leading institutions all over the world. We are ourselves locally trained in Malaysian public universities and have managed to pursue our post-graduate studies in some of the top universities in the world.

Looking at specific courses, according to the QS World University Rankings by subject, UM's medical academic reputation

is the same as Nanyang Technological University, and better than the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland and Cardiff University. USM's chemical engineering faculty is in the world's top 50. Even UUM is highly reputable in business and accounting and has recently received AACSB accreditation (Harvard is in this group).

Across the board, our public universities have 13 subjects in the world's top 100. This is an impressive feat as some of our subjects are much better than in some well-known institutions in the world.

While there are complaints about our graduates having poor English competency, it can't be generalised to all IPTA students. Even though we have debaters who are among the best in the world, we also cannot say that all of our student in IPTA are excellent in English. It is very hard to generalise English competency among the 600,000 current IPTA students. However, our English competency is actually above average.

While we do agree that there are many challenges to enhance English proficiency among our graduates, it doesn't mean our graduates are unemployable. Between 2012 and 2016, the graduate employability numbers for our public university graduates went up by 2.8% to 77.2%. This shows a rising trend in our graduate's employability.

In fact, saying that private university students are more preferred is a bit assertive, as private university graduate employability numbers are lower than public universities for the last few years (based on the Graduate Employability survey conducted by the Higher Education Ministry which is available online).

Beyond rankings and numbers, many public university lecturers

have been trained abroad for their PhDs and some have even conducted post-doctoral research in top institutions in the world including Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard.

Among them are Dr Abhimanyu from UPM who won the International Famelab 2016 competition and Dr Muhammad Saiful who won the Reimagine Education Teaching Delivery Award 2016.

We are especially strong in the sciences with some of our science-based researchers recognised as the world's most influential scientific minds. Their research have been recognised and saved lives all over the world.

Our faculties are working hand in hand with industry on curricula design and our students undergo their internships and practical training with our industry partners.

Although some parents are concerned about the English proficiency of our lecturers, please do remember that some lecturers might be trained in renowned non-English speaking institutions in countries like Japan. Everyone acknowledges that Japan's universities and institutions are world class despite not being strong in English. They have been able to produce many Nobel laureates whose academic work is mainly in their mother tongue. Even the 2015 Nobel laureate Youyou Tu from China does not speak English.

To be clear, English is very important but we must be fair in our reflection.

While it is true that some private universities are gaining reputation fast, many do not realise that private universities are less research intensive than public universities. Research intensity is vital to generate knowledge that benefits society. Public university researchers have created vaccines for avian viruses,

found solutions to water pollution, improved harvesting methods for food security, developed conservation flora and fauna methods, and more.

Lastly, while the budget reductions may pose a challenge, this will never take us away from our responsibilities to our students. Ultimately, it's not about the money but about our passion to teach and educate, and we believe our students will reciprocate.

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