

Local heroes

With more than 500 IHLs here, going abroad seems unnecessary

IN 1957, freshly-minted Malaya had just one university — Universiti Malaya (UM). And that too in Singapore. In the decades that followed, more and more universities — public and private — were set up. Today, there are 20 public universities and 18 private universities, not including 500 institutes of higher learning (IHLs) in one shape or another. Today, perched as Malaysia is, 21 days from being 62, a question grows ripe for an asking. Why is the government paying so much sending our students overseas to get an education that is here for the taking?

Quality may be an issue, but not all local universities are so marred. Malaysia's oldest university — UM — has consistently improved its position from 151 in 2015 to 87 in 2019 in the QS World University ranking. UM is the university of choice for postgraduate students, 20 per cent of whom are from overseas. Other public universities — Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia — have decent placings in the global league table. Our private universities and IHLs are not doing too badly either. UCSI University and Taylor's Uni-

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versity take the two top places, though they are perched above 400 in the world league table. But ranking isn't the whole quality education story. The intangibles in education often can't be tamed into league tables.

Education costs the government money, too. Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah in his 531-page tome, *Striving for Inclusive Development, From Pangkor to A Modern Malaysian State*, says Malaysia's annual government spending on education as a share of gross domestic product has been consistently high over the last four decades at between five and six

per cent. Put differently in per capita language, the expenditure was just over RM850 in 2000 to RM1,800 in 2015. While it is difficult to estimate how much of this money is spent on sending Malaysian students abroad, it must be a considerable sum. Keeping them home will at least achieve two objectives. One, the government will land up spending less. Two, Malaysia will gain by saving on foreign exchange loss.

There is yet another reason why our students should stay home to study: Malaysia is one of the best choices for international students. Last year, there were 170,000 international students from 135 countries, reading for their degrees in our local campuses. If Malaysia does the right thing, this number should spike to 250,000 in 2025. With 538 IHLs, including universities and 11 branch campuses of foreign universities, this target should not slip, slide away.

Staying home to study doesn't mean not going abroad at all. Compleat education means keeping the world in view. Short forays into the education world outside through twinning programmes and industry internships — what our Education Ministry calls 2u2i (two-year university study, two-year industry exposure) — is a laudable concept. Sending Malaysians to far-flung places at a tender age may not be wise. Especially when what they are in search of is right here at home.