

Flexibility in learning

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FLEXIBLE education is the future of education.

With online learning platforms like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and blended education, Universiti Sains Malaysia vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Asma Ismail believes knowledge is no longer confined to lecture halls.

"(These platforms) seem now to be the answer to making education accessible and available (even) to the poor.

"Therefore, flexible education is the way forward in providing students with choices on how, when and where they learn," she said in her keynote speech during the Flexible Education Seminar 2019.

To allow for access to flexible education, Prof Asma said the Education Ministry's Higher Education Department and Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) need to work together.

"After completing a form of flexible education (e-learning, MOOCs), students obtain certificates which is not equivalent to a full degree but employers look at these as a testimony of skill or understanding and (are likely to) promote their employees.

"Employers today hire graduates with competency and skills, rather than graduates with a degree.

"The degree as we know it is slowly but surely beginning to lose its value so whether we like it or not, higher education needs to undergo changes because students are changing," she said, adding that institutions are moving towards a 30% traditional teaching and 70% online teaching methodology.

Students, she believes, must be flexible, adaptable and agile to respond to change.

Due to the global economic crisis, Prof Asma said more students are finding work after completing secondary education.

There is a rise in "non-traditional" students in the workforce who now want to learn, she added.

"They have varying levels of education and experience, they cannot afford four years to complete a university degree, want to learn at their own time and pace, and it has to be personalised to their needs.

"Degrees should be about how much students learn instead of how many hours they spend in the classroom.

"For these students, competency-based education is more attractive compared to the traditional model."

However, although Malaysia is ahead in providing flexible education thanks to efforts such as MQA's Apel (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning), Prof Asma said it is riddled in bureaucracy.



Prof Asma (seventh right), Dr Siti Hamisah (fifth right), Dr Mohd Gazali (sixth right), MQA chief executive officer Datuk Dr Rahmah Mohamed Mohamed (fourth right) and UPM vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Aini Ideris (eight right) at the Flexible Education Seminar 2019.

Admission requirements are flawed, students are taught at the same pace and assessments are scheduled on fixed deadlines, mostly done as a one-size fits all method, that are among the problems.

"So, how flexible are we?" she questioned, saying it is still fragmented.

There are many aspects that need to be sorted, Prof Asma said, such as the affordability of Internet services and threats of bogus providers.

"There are also the challenges of providing inclusive flexible education.

"Education is a basic human right, no one should be excluded from learning opportunities.

"With the ministry, MQA and higher education providers working together, we can deliver," said Prof Asma, who is also MQA chairman.

Higher Education Department director-general Datin Paduka Dr Siti Hamisah Tapsir said the Flexible Education Seminar 2019 was organised by the department and MQA for the first time.

The seminar touched on three topics; recognition of prior learning, Industrial Revolution 4.0-infused academic programmes and industry-infused academic programmes.

Dr Siti Hamisah said it is important to use flexible education platforms as students today are born and brought up in the era of Internet and gadgets.

However, she said in introducing these new methods of teaching, educators have expressed their concerns about the real goal of an education and their role in this millennial age.

"We have to redefine the role of academics, and we have to embrace technology, not fear it."

Education Ministry secretary-general Datuk Dr Mohd Gazali Abas said through flexible education initiatives, students will be exposed to the global classroom concept which gives them the opportunity to decide when and how they want to learn.

"I am confident that it will be implemented successfully because the government is committed to improving the country's quality of education," he added.