

Now everybody has a degree

THE most recent report from a global university ranking organisation provides some cheer with six of the nation's public higher education institutions appearing in the Quacquarelli Symonds listing of 1001 top academic institutions. Heading the 2020 list for Malaysia are Universiti Malaya (70th), Universiti Putra Malaysia (159), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (160), Universiti Sains Malaysia (165), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (217) and Universiti Utara Malaysia (591-600).

Congratulations to the management and staff of these universities that have put the country on the global map in higher education.

The question in many minds now is what is the ranking and standard of the remaining 14 public universities that have failed to get recognition in the QS or the two other commonly referred to global higher education ranking systems - Times Higher Education (THE) and ShanghaiRanking Consultancy (ARWU).

Even if our policymakers choose to ignore the findings of global university ranking organisations - and there are critics who point to the weaknesses in methodology and validity of the input data - there is a growing pool of opinion within and outside the educational sector that we may be arriving - if we have not already arrived - at a much larger crisis in our public sector higher education.

This crisis ironically has its roots in the success of the system. According to the Ministry of Education's publication, Quick Facts 2018, we have a tertiary student enrolment of 538,555 as of Dec

31, 2017. The top six ranked universities account for about 180,000 students meaning that over 350,000 students are enrolled and will be graduating from public universities whose research and teaching standards leave a big question mark if the variables used by the ranking organisations are to be taken seriously or if private sector employers' responses are considered. Included in this large predominantly Malay student population is the 165,000 students in the exclusively Malay/bumiputra Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM).

Data on public universities shows that the majority were set up after 1990. If we assume a total of 100,000 graduates produced annually since the NEP's end, this could mean that our higher education system has produced more than 3 million graduates with possibly 2.5 million from the Malay community; and perhaps one million from UiTM.

This output of higher degree certificated manpower during such a short time is not only a staggering achievement. It may be one that is possibly unprecedented in the world.

Educational Attainment of Population Aged 25 Years and Older (% with Bachelor Degree)

Finland	11.4	(2014)
Malaysia	16.4	(2010)
Japan	29.9	(2010)
Germany	13.7	(2015)
Australia	22.1	(2015)
Korea	20.8	(2010)
United Kingdom	17.1	(2014)
United States	20.5	(2015)

Source: Unesco Institute of Statistics



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Confirmation of this achievement may be seen from the table which shows that by 2010 the educational attainment of our population aged 25 years and older was already higher than that of Finland, Germany and the UK, the role model countries in educational attainment.

This extraordinary success with higher education is confirmed by data on the proportion of our adult population who have upper secondary schooling. A comparison of the available country data indicates that we may have a higher proportion of our adult population attaining that level of education than most developed countries since 10 years ago.

It could well be that simply on the basis of paper qualifications, Malaysia may have the most degree holders per capita in Asia if not the world.

It is an achievement which politicians and policymakers intent on continuing the New Economic Policy ad infinitum do not seem to be aware of. Or if they are, it appears to be one that they do not want to discuss or make widely known.

In part this is because it has resulted, paradoxically, in the larger crisis in higher education that we see today. This crisis raises questions about the course of higher education that our political leaders and education bureaucracy will find difficult to answer. However it is one which needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

The public sector higher education crisis is multidimensional and goes well beyond the concerns over plagiarism and other corrupt practices.

It includes aspects related to quality

of education, unemployability, absence of meritocracy, lack of academic freedom, low teaching and research standards, staff demoralisation, governance shortcomings, alleged promotions based on political connections, increased incidence of outsourced work and cheque book academia.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect is that the higher education production train cannot be held back or stopped. It will continue to produce larger numbers of graduates in the coming years. One estimate is that the number of post secondary students will double from 1.2 million to 2.5 million in the short period from 2012 and 2025, with the majority expected to come from the B40 Malay household category.

How can the economy and society meet the expectations of the millions of Malay and other students - many deferring employment opportunities and having to use up family savings or borrowing from PTPTN to finance their way to earning qualifications ill suited to the demands of an already civil service saturated employment market - is a ticking time bomb.

The nation needs a Royal Commission of Inquiry to address this subject immediately. Included in the RCI's terms of reference too will have to be the reforms needed over the spectrum of the nation's post secondary educational system, including the universities, to rescue it from the impending train wreck.

This is the fifth in a series on the state of Malay dominance.