

Managing international academics

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THE internationalisation of higher education not only has seen the arrival of foreign students into Malaysia to pursue tertiary studies at education institutions in the country, but also an increase in the recruitment of international academics in Malaysian universities.

The rationale behind the move, as stated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025, was to enhance the quality of the education system through attracting talent in the form of inspiring educators, accomplished researchers and transformation thought leaders and make Malaysian universities be more competitive in the global arena.

Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility (CTEF) director Professor Datuk Dr Morshidi Sirat said while there is a clear guideline for accepting foreign students into universities in Malaysia, the recruitment of international academics is pretty much dependent on the judgement and funding available in an institution.

"We need to have an evidence-based policy as to whom we should bring in and what sort of contribution and impact they should give to Malaysian higher education and society in general," he said.

"Otherwise, we are just bringing in people who have no jobs elsewhere. We need to be careful."

He was speaking at the sidelines of a forum on Commonwealth Academics in Malaysia at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

The forum, titled "Commonwealth Academics in Malaysian Universities: Boon or Bane?" was a collaboration between CTEF, which is based at Universiti Sains Malaysia's National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN), and the Malaysian Society for Higher Education Policy and Research and Development.

The objectives of the forum were to engage international academics from Commonwealth countries to share their experience, deliberate on the perceived and real impacts of international academics in Malaysian universities and identify current and emerging issues pertaining to the recruitment and retention of international academics from Commonwealth countries in Malaysia.

The discussion hoped to provide input for policy intervention at the institutional and national level with respect to the recruitment and retention of international academics from Commonwealth countries in the Malaysian higher education system.

On the panel were IPPTN deputy director Dr Wan Chang Da and international academics comprising director of University Malaya's Centre for Research in Biotechnology for Agriculture Professor Dr Jennifer Ann Harikrishna, who hails from the United Kingdom; Professor Dr Nasir Shafiq, an academician and researcher from Pakistan with 30 years' experience at the Department of Civil and Environmental

Engineering, Universiti Teknologi Petronas Malaysia; and Emeritus Professor Dr Abdul Rashid Moten, a Bangladeshi political scientist at International Islamic University Malaysia's (IIUM) Centre for Islamisation.

Wan provided an overview of the higher education landscape involving international academics in Malaysia.

"From the data we have, we know general information like the number, qualification, rank and gender of international academics currently employed in Malaysia. However, we do not know details like the nationalities of the international staff and we lack the understanding of their motivation to come to our universities, which is crucial in determining the success of the policy that would decide whether we want more or decrease the number of international staff," he said.

From a survey of three public universities in 2016, Wan said it was found that there are three types of international staff.

"Type 1 are recruited for professional programmes such as medical and engineering to fill gaps in the local resources.

"Type 2A are prominent and renowned scholars for ranking purposes that are tasked with research. They are given generous packages with labs and funding with the hopes of producing Nobel prize winners in Malaysian institutions.

"Type 2B are junior staff who are expected to produce research papers for the purpose of rankings.

"And, Type 3 are those recruited on needs base to fill gaps in departments or have personal reasons to stay in Malaysia, such as students who studied here and continue to stay on here."

The list raised two points on the role of international academics: Do Malaysian institutions want international academics for ranking purposes, or to enhance diversity of knowledge and development in various areas of expertise?

Wan said this has vast implications as international academics do not have job security as they are always hired on a contract basis and not as permanent staff and may not be able to commit to a project as expected like locals, or contribute more towards the development of an institution and the strategic direction of a university.

"This then looks at the issue of equality. Do we have first-class and second-class citizens at universities and whether we really appreciate one another's contribution," he said.

Jennifer said with limited resources to address the world's problems, the presence of Commonwealth scientists at research facilities in Malaysian universities is more of a boon to the local higher education system, coming from the same common legal structures and similar platforms.

"We all want to work on the same things and we have a tremendous opportunity to do so without having to work from scratch and reinvent the wheel," she said.

"Scientists often view themselves as global citizens, not someone who is bound by nationality.



(From left) Panellists Professor Dr Jennifer Ann Harikrishna, Emeritus Professor Dr Abdul Rashid Moten, Professor Dr Nasir Shafiq and Dr Wan Chang Da at the forum on Commonwealth Academics in Malaysia at Universiti Putra Malaysia. PIC BY ROSELA ISMAIL

A clear role on what they are doing from the word go when recruited by Malaysian universities and the ability to hit the ground running when they join a lab with mutual respect from other academics in research would be beneficial for all, both academics and institutions.

"Maybe the human resources division needs to be educated on this aspect to make recruitment of international academics more impactful," she said.

Abdul Rashid said scholarship did not only involve teaching and learning, but also spiritual development and the consciousness to serve the community.

He said there are two categories of international academics: those busy collecting money though they serve people and those who strive to improve life through research, teaching and community interaction.

"Good lecturers of high demand, when there is a salary cut, will go where there is demand. Lecturers with no demand, even with a 50 per cent salary cut, will stay because they have no where to go," he said.

Nasir said having people of different cultures and background as part of the faculty means having diversified knowledge and thinking power.

"Malaysia can get better positions in world rankings because of this diversity. However, it is important that universities support professional and personal needs of international academics to retain them," he said.

Based on his experience, he said, the provision that eased an academic to settle in with their family was of utmost importance, as well as the opportunity to be involved in the development of the university.

"This will convince the academic to stay longer and be more invested in their role at the university."

UPM vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dr Aini Ideris, in her speech before the start of the forum, said the university had allocated a specific budget to appoint international academics, especially in critical fields.

The availability of international research grants and industry endowment at UPM, she said, had also attracted prominent international academics to work with UPM.

"Every year, we set targets to recruit and get prominent international lecturers and academicians that are specialists in various research areas, and are aligned with the requirements and needs of faculties and research institutes in UPM," she said.

"We believe that international academics can contribute to the internationalisation of our research excellence, and extend our global network and reputation."

UPM has more than 100 international academics, ranging from full-time lecturers to honorary visiting professors in various expertise. They are from the Commonwealth and other countries.

"This number has increased steadily due to the fact that UPM values international talents in providing consultation to faculty members in academic matters, curriculum development and research to further enhance collaboration," said Aini.



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PROFESSOR DATUK DR MORSHIDI SIRAT

Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility (CTEF) director