

Separation can be a good thing

Many say the Higher Education Ministry will lead to growth in tertiary education

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PETALING JAYA: Their “relationship status” is back to being “single” or “separated” again.

But education groups are optimistic that the splitting of the Education Ministry to the Higher Education Ministry in the latest Cabinet line-up will boost Malaysia’s higher education sector once more.

For the past two years, schools and higher education institutions had come under the Education Ministry.

With the setting up of a Higher Education Ministry again, as announced on March 9, focus returns to the sector as the country seeks to achieve its 200,000 international students target by this year.

Despite the “sudden split”, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Administrators’ Association and General Workers Union (Kepertama) is of the view that it would not take long for the officers from the ministry to attune to the changes.

“They are ready and well-versed with what’s needed,” said Kepertama president Mohd Razali Singah.

Furthermore, he said that this was not the first time the Education Ministry was separated in such a manner.

“Having two ministries is better for Malaysia to establish itself as an international education hub.

“There are many higher education issues that need urgent attention,” said Razali, who is also the deputy president of the Combined Council of Presidents and Honorary Secretaries of University Unions/IPTA in Malaysia.

Malaysian Society for Higher Education Policy and Research Development secretary Assoc Prof Dr Mohd Izani Mohd Zain said it would take several months for those involved to manage the split.

This was because the Education Ministry’s civil servants’ posts and responsibilities had been merged previously.

However, Prof Mohd Izani said a targeted ministry to address higher education matters would create a better governing ecosystem.

“The higher education sector is vital, as academic research is crucial for innovation-based economy and to meet new developments and challenges,” he said, adding that previously, the Education Ministry’s attention was split between teachers, schools, parents, and higher education institutions.

This had adversely impacted higher educa-

tion planning, policy and practices, which were complex and technical, he said.

He said having a ministry dedicated to higher education would reduce bureaucracy and accelerate decision-making and policy implementation.

“The success of the country’s vision depends largely on efforts to improve the quality of higher education and this requires a specific ministry,” he said, adding that the split would strengthen the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint (2015-2025).

Initiatives like research universities, TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training), academic integrity and industry-academia relations only came about when the ministries were merged.

“None of these would have happened if higher education didn’t have its own ‘home’,” he said.

Higher education has always been part of the Education Ministry until 2004 when then Prime Minister Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi separated the ministry into “Education” and “Higher Education”.

The creation of the two ministries then was to ensure both sectors received equal focus as it was thought to be too unwieldy under one.

In May 2013, his successor Datuk Seri Najib Razak merged the ministries.

But in June 2015, the ministries were again split following a Cabinet reshuffle.

The ministries were “reunited” once more following Pakatan Harapan’s win in the 2018 General Election.

And the latest divorce came on March 9 when Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin unveiled his Cabinet line-up.

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia senior lecturer Dr Muzaffar Syah Mallow said there should not be any more flip-flops if Malaysia were serious about becoming the region’s education hub.

“It’s vital for the government to give a clear assurance that the two ministries will continue to exist separately for the split to bring a positive change,” he said.

He said those appointed to head the ministries must understand the problems faced by the Malaysian education system.

“Our education sector is growing. Issues and problems are becoming more complex, making it tough for a single ministry to manage.

“The government must set aside any political differences if they want to improve the quality of our education,” he added.