

01/04/1998

From adversity to excellence

K T Tan

YOU HEARD it here first. Several years down the road, somebody is bound to write a thesis on the current economic downturn's impact on the education sector. Chances are it will be an account of achievement amidst adversity. This is not all that fanciful an idea. When the storm blows over, we will find that the ringgit slide and, to a certain extent, the deep discounts on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange have reshaped the local education landscape.

The jury is still out on whether the changes will be lasting and positive on the whole, but the signs are strong that they will indeed be so. The economic downturn has an accelerator effect on the education sector, which for a few years had been gearing up to transform Malaysia into a regional centre of educational excellence. Almost overnight, the process is hastened.

When foreign education became intolerably expensive due to our weakened currency, many of the 50,000 Malaysians studying abroad (of whom 15,000 are government-sponsored) faced the prospect of having to come home. For most people here, venturing overseas for a paper qualification is rarely a viable option.

Never mind that universities and governments of countries such as Britain, Canada and Japan are keen to hand out financial assistance to our students. At best, only some will be fortunate enough to benefit. The best solution is to educate more Malaysians at home.

The local institutions are called upon to quickly swing into action to offer more places. They have to expand and improve. The fast-shifting market dictates that they come up with alternative study routes and new courses while remaining competitive and reputable.

On March 4, Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak announced that public and private universities have allocated 2,305 places for Malaysian students coming home due to financial woes.

A week later, he outlined 12 conditions for private colleges seeking to conduct foreign degree courses entirely in the country (popularly called '3+0' programmes). The thrust of these guidelines is to ensure quality higher education at lower fees.

In July, Monash University Sunway Campus Malaysia, the country's first branch campus of a foreign university, will take in its pioneer batch of 650 students. It is likely that there will be more such branch campuses soon, thus providing another way to get a degree from a foreign university without leaving Malaysia.

Naturally, there is widespread concern about growing pains and predatory practices. Najib recently addressed these worries by assuring that the government would make sure quality was not sacrificed in the push to give more Malaysians the chance to further their studies.

'Admittedly, we do not have enough places for all who want to pursue higher education. That is why we have about 50,000 Malaysian students abroad.

'We need to increase the number of places but it will not be to such an extent that there will, one day, be more places than students. If this happens, the viability of our universities will be at stake. Universities may be forced to close if they cannot attract enough students,' he said. The sector's drive towards excellence need not be fuelled solely by domestic needs. Economic Review, a bi-monthly publication of Public Bank's

economic division, said the private education industry had the potential to be a major foreign exchange earner.

To realise this potential, the publication suggested that the industry promote its services abroad based on its lower and efficient costs compared with those of developed countries.

It was reported recently that 4,709 foreigners (mainly from the Middle East, Africa and Asia) study here. They contribute RM52.65 million to the economy.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of education in Malaysia. When the New Straits Times reported on Feb 7 that local commercial banks had stopped giving out study loans, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim responded immediately by stressing that education was a productive sector. He said banks were allowed, even encouraged, to grant study loans.

An area that is often singled out is information technology (IT) education, which is understandable given that the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is set to vault the country into the 21st century.

Last February, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the MSC needed 7,000 knowledge workers a year for several years. In total, the MSC will have 25,000 employees. The Multimedia University in Cyberjaya is expected to cater for part of this manpower demand.

However, the need for IT education extends beyond the MSC. A computer-literate population is a vital ingredient for Malaysia's march towards fully developed nation status.

It is not surprising then to note that Deputy Education Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn was quoted as saying last January that his ministry would not allow budget cuts to affect the setting up of Smart schools.

The ministry has been allocated RM50 million for the project, which will initially have 90 Smart schools. It was reported that there will be some 500 Smart schools with an enrolment of 300,000 by the year 2000.

It is indeed a sign of the times when outgoing Army Chief Jen Datuk Ismail Hassan last December urged students of the Royal Military College to master IT to keep up with the implementation of the Smart school project and the Multimedia Super Corridor.

(END)