

COMMENT | Can an academician minister halt university decline?

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COMMENT | Lately, a debate has emerged about whether career academics or people outside of academia should be appointed as the Minister of Higher Education (MOHE). I would like to discuss this issue within the context of the deteriorating quality of our universities.

The issue of whether the minister should come from an academic background was mentioned at a recent forum.

The forum focused on the intersectionality of public policy and higher education. It was organised by undergraduate political science students at a public university.

They did a superb job. However, and this is no fault of the organisers, the atmosphere at the faculty auditorium often “see-sawed” between dignified and scholarly discourse, and boisterous, fist-pumping, political sloganeering and rallying.

This was probably unavoidable since the speakers were impassioned, and the panel featured both academics and politicians.

What is more critical though is the specific takeaway that the media latched onto. The issue that was reported was that, come GE16, the higher education minister ought to be an academician and not a politician.

It was disappointing that this is all the media picked up, only because it is among the least significant of factors contributing to the current crisis in higher education.

It is common knowledge that there are dozens of other formidable reasons why the quality of our public universities has deteriorated so drastically over the decades.

It is due mainly to political interference, and the lack of political will among key decision-makers at both the university and ministry levels.

What about Vice-Chancellors?

Vice-Chancellors (VCs) are the visible symbols of a university's reputation. Instead of prolonging the narrative that the minister should be from academia,

we should be debating why too many of our VCs are neither scholars, ethical individuals, people of integrity, public intellectuals, nor thinkers with a philosophical long-term vision for the nation.

Furthermore, the debate should focus on university leadership and political interference, rather than the superficial issue of the minister's academic or political background.

What sort of Vice-Chancellor should lead our public universities? From which sector should they come? What kind of professional experience should they have before helming a university? How "academic" or scholarly should they be? Should they be male or female, Malay or non-Malay?

These questions highlight a more serious issue about Malaysia's "mindset crisis" when it comes to leadership in our universities and the role universities play in nation-building.

Even if a professor or scholar is appointed as minister, there is no guarantee this scholar will lead with integrity, without their own political agenda. There is no guarantee this "scholar minister" would not appoint his or her political cronies to top university leadership positions.

Furthermore, the problem in Malaysian public universities is not who the minister is, as much as how the ministry and other higher education agencies interfere in the academic and human resource details of running the universities.

Political interference, academic dishonesty, lack of university autonomy, rigid bureaucratic control by accreditation agencies, and the expanding “profesor kangkong” syndrome are plaguing the majority of our public universities.

Just because we appoint an academic as minister does not mean he or she will have the political will to tackle these problems.

Culture of politics

Our public universities are heavily politicised, which is the reason why many lecturers have either quit academia or emigrated. They have given up on their efforts to be public intellectuals or scholars, or simply “to make a difference” in Malaysian society.

The lack of political will has driven some of our best thinkers to Singapore, Australia, the US, and Britain. There are very few left in the system who “stick it out”, and these numbers are dwindling.

Unless this dual narrative of political interference and political will is kept alive in daily discourse, it is useless to recommend that the minister be a scholar or academician. Ultimately, this is the least significant matter in the bigger picture of our higher education crisis.

Furthermore, recent history has revealed that even a minister with the best of intentions eventually gets sucked into a “political game” of partisan politics because of a lack of political will.

On the other hand, any minister with the political will to stamp out mediocrity in our universities should remain the minister of higher education, regardless of professional background, gender, age, or ethnicity.

Such a person would probably have the integrity to end the political subordination of top university management such as the VCs, Deputy VCs, and the BODs, to partisan politics.

This person would probably put an end to the culture of political patronage and loyalty to politicians that are so prevalent among our top public university leadership. This person would understand the intricate role universities play in nation-building.

What Malaysia needs is a higher education minister with the political will to respect and critically engage our universities. Likewise, top university management must empower themselves to be autonomous and steer away from the “yes-men” culture that has wiped out critical thinking on our campuses.

It is my hope that the current minister of higher education reaches out more to reform-minded higher education civil society organisations (CSOs) to update himself on “matters at ground level”.

Get more feedback from lecturers, university administrators, and students, about the problems they have been facing. Get first-hand information about the extent of academic dishonesty in many universities - such as plagiarism and forced co-authorship, the toxic culture of academic bullying, and sexual harassment faced by both academics and students.

Engage lecturers about how they feel about universities and the ministry’s obsession with university rankings. Get their feedback on how this obsession is increasingly becoming an obstacle to the quality of their research, teaching, and publications.

Finally, a national search committee must be established, to appoint top university management, namely our VCs, Deputy VCs, and BODs. Also, a detailed

review of the higher education agencies such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) and Akept must be on the minister's agenda.

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