

Private sector has role to play in education

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In the proposed Tenth Malaysia Plan scheduled to be unveiled next year (2010), the government will again re-commit to develop human resources through improving our education system.

We have heard all these before, but the twist this time is that the government will actively engage the private sector.

I applaud this. There are many avenues for private sector involvement in education at all levels, either independently or in a variety of public-private partnerships (PPP).

Two points are worth noting as Malaysia embarks on this endeavour. The first is that there are already many models of private sector involvement in education throughout the developed and developing world.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. All we have to do is study these existing models, ascertain their strengths and weaknesses, and then adopt with suitable modifications the ones that would best suit our needs.

There is no point in adopting wholesale a system that works wonderfully in South Korea or the Netherlands. Their society is very different from ours.

Theirs is homogeneous ethnically, culturally and also linguistically. Ours is diverse, separated by race, culture, language, and religion, among others. Failure to recognise this essential difference would doom any plan.

The second is that no matter how brilliant and diligent our policymakers are, they cannot anticipate everything. Thus the policies they create can never be perfect. Even when the policy is sound but if the implementation were flawed, that would also destroy and discredit the policy. That would make the later resurrection of what otherwise had been a sound policy that much more difficult.

Implementation cannot be rushed

In Malaysia there is a wide gulf separating the formulation and implementation of a policy. There are many ready examples, the latest being the debacle over the teaching of science and mathematics in English. In the end it is our students, not our leaders and officials, who bear the brunt of poor planning and execution.

I may be stating the obvious, but it would take more than just a bit of humility on the part of our leaders to acknowledge and then accept this reality. Our leaders and policymakers think they know it all.

When formulating a policy, you want the greatest possible input from all sources, especially the various stakeholders. The best time to do this is after you put forth your preliminary plan. Then post it on the Internet and invite written submissions from all.

Go beyond simply issuing a passive open invitation but actively solicit the views of key players like heads of private universities, leaders of industry, local and foreign educators, student and faculty leaders, and yes, even if not especially politicians. Make it clear to all that the plan at that stage is only preliminary and subject to radical changes.

Again I would also post those submissions on the web so others could view them. At this stage the submissions would have to be written to ensure that only those who are serious and willing to put their thoughts on paper would respond. This is also an effective way to weed out those who are interested only in posturing and spouting off. This would also discourage ugly and distracting demonstrations.

Asking for submissions before you have a preliminary plan would result only in unfocussed and jumbled submissions, as responders would not have an idea of the scale and scope of your proposed reform.

When all the comments are in, I would invite those with substantive ideas (as judged by their submissions) to direct conversations. Only after all that would I rewrite the policy incorporating the fresh insights and perspectives.

This is the only way to garner the widest possible input and to tap the wisdom of the crowd. It is also an effective way to make the stakeholders buy into your proposed policy as they had been engaged in its formulation.

Even after all these I would still be cautious when implementing it. I would first do some downstream analyses anticipating possible problems and sources of opposition. Anticipate a problem and you are already halfway to solving it.

Pilot projects key

Again to be cautious, I would start small, with a limited number of pilot projects that could be easily monitored closely. It would also be easier to iron out the inevitable kinks, get feedback from the participants, and evaluate the preliminary results. Only when all is working smoothly and as expected would I expand the program nationwide. Anything less and you would risk jeopardising your policy.

The same thing goes with the upcoming policy of engaging the private sector in education. I would post the proposed policy on the Internet, seek the widest possible input, and then revisit your policy based on those comments.

When implementing the final policy, be cautious and start with a manageable number of pilot projects. Only when all is smooth sailing would you expand the program.

Malaysia has yet to recognise the full potential contributions the private sector could make to education, as there is as yet no coherent policy to govern it. Instead, what we have is a series of ad hoc rules and policy pronouncements.

If we were to have an enlightened policy we would realize that creatively marshalled, the public sector's contribution could be significant.

It would lighten the government's load, thus enabling it to focus on the truly needy and be able to do a better job.

With its flexibility and responsiveness, the private sector would be in a better position to meet the increasingly sophisticated and varied educational needs of Malaysians.

Most importantly, the entry of the private sector would provide much-needed competition thereby improving services all around. It would also provide our students (and their parents) with some meaningful choices.

Before these could happen however, our leaders must rid themselves of their entrenched "zero-sum" mentality that views the private sector in adversarial rather than complementary terms. Otherwise all those fancy policy statements and earnest public pronouncements would mean nothing; the reality on the ground would remain unchanged.

In this six-part essay I explore ways for meaningful and productive private sector participation in Malaysian education. Following this introduction, I will discuss the rationale for such a participation, and then my examination of the current state of affairs.

The fourth part is my appraisal of the experiences elsewhere, from both developed and developing countries, for useful lessons that Malaysia could learn. The next two parts are my specific prescriptions for greater private sector involvement in our schools and then post-secondary institutions.

We have seen far too many examples of ill-conceived policies, of sound policies incompetently implemented, and privatisation projects that benefited only the few at the expense of the many. I hope this time around the government will do it right. This commentary is my contribution towards that goal.

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