

Private sector has role to play in education (Pt 2)

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Education, specifically the language of instruction in institutions, is a highly politically-charged issue in Malaysia, as with any plural society. America for example still grapples with how best to integrate through its schools the children of minorities.

Until recently Canada had to contend with its own English-French language rivalry.

While education can be a divisive issue in a plural society, ironically when creatively handled it could serve as an important instrument for social integration. For Malaysia, it is critical that educational institutions should serve this important function and not be satisfied merely with their traditional role

American public schools have been remarkably successful, at least until recently, in integrating its various immigrants into the mainstream. Malaysian schools during colonial rule, specifically the English language ones, were more successful in this integrating role than our current national schools.

Failure in this crucial role would result in a society that is highly educated but deeply divided; another Northern Ireland. The increasing polarisation along racial lines that we see in Malaysia today is attributed in part to the failure of our schools and universities to play this important role of social integration.

Education in Malaysia has the added burden of being an important cultural symbol. The emotional and political significance of that cannot be lightly dismissed, for both can be overriding and at times overwhelming.

The consequence is that Malaysian education has, since independence, been under the tight control of the central government, with the private sector playing only a peripheral role.

Recent moves towards liberalisation may have altered the details of the landscape, but the underlying theme remains. As a result the full potential of the contributions of the private sector has yet to be realised.

The move to co-opt the private sector in helping the nation become an "educational hub" has less to do with educational objectives but more with economics: the earning and preserving of valuable foreign exchange. Consequently the ensuing discussions rarely if ever focused on first elevating the quality of education.

If we concentrate on enhancing the quality of our education, foreigners would pay premium dollars to attend our institutions, thus contributing to our foreign exchange. At the same time our students would make our colleges and universities their first choice instead of looking abroad, thus preserving valuable foreign exchange. The economic objectives would thus have been met.

As I see no major policy shift in the near future, Malaysian public universities will continue to be under heavy government control, making them unlikely to shine.

They will continue to suffer the same sorry decline afflicting all our public institutions. So do not expect our public schools and universities to lead us to greatness. Recent angst on the state of our public universities supports my contention.

Consequently private universities, colleges and schools, freed as they are from governmental micromanagement, would be our only salvation. Hence the need to nurture them. For them to make their proper contributions however, they must be freed from governmentally-imposed barriers.

Private institutions do not necessarily need government support - although that would help - rather we need to rationalise their role so they could play a more positive part.

A major stumbling block is to overcome the current mindset that views the private sector as an unwelcome competitor instead of accepting its legitimate role of complementing public institutions. Our officials still have that old "zero-sum" mentality, viewing the private and public sectors as two candles, one trying to outshine the other.

They expend their efforts not on making their own candle shine brighter but on snuffing out the other. As a result what we have today are two dim candles. The challenge is on making both candles shine brightly so together they would brighten the nation.

I liken the private and public sectors to the Petronas Twin Towers, each block enhancing the appearance as well as capacity of the complex as a whole. Unlike the Twin Towers however, we should have not one but many levels of interconnecting bridges between our public and private educational institutions so students could seamlessly move from one to the other.

Rationalising the role of the private sector is not merely to increase the number of private institutions rather in having quality ones that would meet the needs and aspirations of a modern Malaysia.

The increase in the number of private educational institutions that we see today may not necessarily reflect a healthy development. On the contrary, that may be the consequence of the sorry state of our public institutions.

Advantages to private sector participation

Singapore does not have many private schools and colleges simply because their public ones are so superior. The National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University are such quality institutions that mediocre private universities would not have a chance competing against the two; likewise with its schools. Even international schools there do not have a waiting list.

Similarly in oil-rich Alberta, Canada, there are few private schools for, as the Economist rightly noted, even rich Albertans send their children to public schools. Their public schools are that good!

Malaysia is ahead of many developing countries in recognising that the government is not the only entity capable of providing basic public goods and services. However, it is only recently that this realisation is being applied to the education sector.

The advantages to private sector participation are obvious. With the private sector partially bearing the load, the demand on the public sector would thus be lighter, enabling the government to provide even better services. This is especially true for a developing nation where resources are scarce and the demand heavy.

In a developed country where the citizens are sophisticated and likewise their educational needs, there is no way the government could meet them. In this situation, the nimbleness and flexibility of the private sector come in handy.

Malaysia is in between, with a sizable population clearly demanding a First World level of sophistication in the educational needs of their children but with the vast majority still needing the basics. There is no conceivable way for the government to meet these varying needs and expectations even if it has unlimited resources.

Nor can these varied needs be satisfied through a rigid single-school system, as advocated by some misguided souls. Instead what we need is to enlist the private sector with its flexibility and responsiveness to add to the diversity of services and offerings.

Regardless, whether in a developed or still developing country, the entry of the private sector would provide much-needed competition. Properly harnessed, like all competitive situations, it would only improve services all around, including alleviating the urban-rural as well as rich-poor divide.

What we do not want and have to be vigilant about is for the entry of the private sector to result in increasing the social divide and greater polarisation of the nation.

We should not expect the entry of the private sector to be welcomed especially where the public sector has been entrenched and acquired powerful constituencies. The teachers' unions for one would be rightly concerned about loss of job security, among others.

Powerful political entities would equate the entry of the private sector to a loss of control. Sometimes under such circumstances it would be best not to confront those entities directly but to start afresh somewhere else, as with new schools and colleges.

This is an opportune time to examine and rationalise the role of the private sector in education. In the Tenth Malaysia Plan the government will commit itself to re-emphasising the development of human capital. A critical examination of the roles and contributions of the private sector should be a major part of that planning.

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