

Private sector has role to play in education (Pt 3)

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M Bakri Musa

Currently private sector participation is limited to the polar ends of the education spectrum. The private sector has unbridled access to preschool, and increasing liberalisation at the post-secondary level.

In between (Years 1-11), private sector participation is extremely limited and tightly controlled. There is no coherent or comprehensive attempt to rationalise the role of the private sector. The result is a hodgepodge of the various elements instead of a cohesive pattern.

Thus instead of an exquisite cuisine with the various ingredients contributing to and enhancing the final flavor, Malaysian education is akin to a stew of leftovers, with a few new ingredients thrown in to put a fresh taste. The final concoction is more like dinner at grandma's house on the third day of Hari Raya; not quite rancid yet, but not refreshing either.

Private preschools and schools

The result of unfettered private sector participation at preschools is this. Some are superb, with the teachers, facilities and results matching the best elsewhere. Then we have preschools located near dumpsites or busy streets, and posing significant dangers to the children.

The standard of hygiene is such that outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease occur with distressing regularity. As for their staff and operators, none are subjected to criminal background checks.

More problematic is that these pre-schools are highly segregated racially, religiously, and socially. Many preach a virulent form of ethnic, religious and other cultural pride that would be inimical to the development of a harmonious plural society. Because of the government's essentially "hands-off" policy, these sinister developments remain unchecked, and that could haunt us later.

The private sector has a minimal role at Years 1-11. There are a few private religious (mainly Islamic) and vernacular schools but their aggregate contribution is marginal, with the exception of a few excellent, well-endowed independent Chinese schools.

There are only about 60 such schools but they send more students to top universities than all the other schools combined. They may be excellent but their influence on the greater Malaysian scheme of things is severely limited because they make no attempt to broaden their appeal to the other communities.

Nonetheless the association representing them is among the most powerful, ready and able to challenge the Umno ultras.

These private schools receive no formal public funding except at opportune times as during tight election campaigns. Then the government would make a grand show of its on-the-spot generosity. This happens frequently in Penang and Selangor for the Chinese schools, and Kelantan and Trengganu for the madrasahs.

If these excellent independent Chinese schools were to change their mission from being Chinese (meaning, catering primarily to their own clan) and instead be one that happens to use Mandarin as its medium of instruction and then actively seeks students and teachers from the other communities, then these schools would be my ready model for an ideal private school for Malaysia. For that to happen would require a monumental shift in mindset of their leaders. I'm uncertain whether they are capable of that.

As for international schools (the other group of private schools), only Malaysian children who previously attended schools abroad (as with children of diplomats) are permitted to apply. Admission requires the permission of the Minister of Education himself, indicating a high-level decision. Consequently only a few Malaysians are enrolled although the demand is great. Of course this being Malaysia, children of the influential have minimal difficulty securing that permission.

Private post-secondary institutions

As for private universities, a seminal development was the Private Higher Education Institutions Act of 1996, permitting the setting of private degree-granting institutions, hitherto the exclusive preserve of public universities. Within the first few years of its adoption there was a mushrooming of private tertiary institutions, with the number zooming to nearly 600 from fewer than 50!

Such an explosive development would tax even the most efficient regulatory agency, and ours is far from being the best. Consequently many of these colleges are nothing more than rented spaces over empty shop lots. They also have the lifespan of mushrooms. Many of the permits were granted to those known more for their political connections and financial might rather than academic weight.

These 'educational' institutions do not serve their students or the nation well. They excel only in having the rich part with their hard-earned money. They are not likely to propel the nation into its next trajectory of development. On the contrary, they will weigh us down.

Nonetheless, amidst the pebbles there are a few gems, like the local wing of Monash and the University of Nottingham. These institutions have their reputation to protect, and they are precisely the ones Malaysia should encourage and support.

The other noteworthy private colleges are longstanding ones like Taylor which began initially by catering to the needs of school leavers who could not get slots in public institutions. With the deterioration of public institutions, combined with their exclusive use of Malay, these private institutions expanded their turf to meet the demands of Malaysians wishing to enhance their marketability.

Thanks to their entrepreneurialism and innovativeness, the likes of Taylor have expanded far beyond their initial offerings of 'twinning' and external degree programmes. Today they grant their own degrees, even graduates ones!

Then there are the major private institutions associated with government-linked companies; Unitem (of Tenaga Nasional) and Petronas are ready examples. They are private in name only, for like their parent GLC, they are under heavy government control.

The major political parties too, Umno excepted, sponsor their own private colleges. MCA has its Tunku Abdul Rahman College (TARC). The name is its only sop to Malay sensitivity. MIC has its TAFE and AIMST colleges, including (if you can believe it) a medical school! Unlike the Chinese, the Indians love acronyms for their institutions. Also unlike the Chinese, the

Indians make no effort to appeal to Malay sensitivity by giving their institutions local-sounding names.

TARC is the oldest, biggest, and most successful. It was MCA's second choice after Malay ultras scuttled its demands for Merdeka University. Unable to grant degrees, TARC initially focused on preparing its students for globally (principally British) recognised professional qualifications. Because of that, and its emphasis on English, TARC graduates are in demand in the marketplace.

It is the supreme irony, one that has not dawned on many, that those Malay ultras had actually advanced the cause of the Chinese by denying them a university. If those ultras had acceded to MCA's demands of a Chinese-language university, what Malaysia would have today is another of the old Nanyang University, with its graduates well versed in the ways of ancient China but totally unprepared for the modern marketplace. TARC on the other hand produces sub-professionals with recognised foreign qualifications, precisely what the market needs.

Deficiencies of private colleges and universities

Private Malaysian colleges suffer from three major deficiencies. First, with few exceptions, their academic offerings are wanting. Their degrees and diplomas are heavy on such utility disciplines as marketing, accounting and engineering. As for engineering, I'm uncertain of the difference between their degree and a technical diploma. In perusing the syllabus, it is clear that the engineers they produce are mere technicians, not educated professionals.

How could these institutions produce educated professionals when they lack a core liberal arts faculty or unit? How can you teach your students English and learn to think critically when you do not have the basics such as an English or Philosophy Department?

To date no private university has a Department of Malay Studies. I would have thought that having a branch campus in Malaysia would have been an excellent opportunity for Monash and Nottingham to strengthen or establish their Department of Malay Studies.

Most of these private institutions are nothing more than glorified trade schools, catering strictly to the demands of the marketplace. Not that there is anything wrong with that, only that is not what I have in mind with a traditional university.

The liberal arts may have little marketplace value, but in the end that is what separates the graduates and professionals you produce from mere technicians. What makes the great American universities great, including the highly 'technical' ones like MIT and Caltech, is their strong liberal arts core and commitment.

I would have thought since these private colleges have limited resources they would husband them and be more focused in their mission. Far from it! They typically have a smorgasbord of academic offerings, from vocational training to secretarial courses, and from diploma to pre-university, twinning, as well as degree and even postgraduate studies. All on the same campus and with the same staff!

Running any one of those programmes well would tax even the most talented educator. These private colleges are trying to be all things to all people at the same time, or at least to people who could afford their fees. This miss-mesh strategy is clearly aimed less at improving individual programmes, more on maximising revenue.

Their anemic academic offerings are matched only by their mediocre physical facilities. Many lack the amenities one normally expects of a campus: No auditoria, sports facilities, or

students' dormitories. While even the smallest American campus would have a sports team and a string quartet, even the largest private Malaysian universities do not offer these. For these institutions, anything not related to their students passing their final examinations is deemed irrelevant.

The biggest criticism is that these private institutions contribute to the greater segregation and polarisation of Malaysians. They are essentially non-Bumiputra institutions; there is minimal attempt at diversifying the student body or faculty. Worse, these institutions justify their stand by arguing that they are remedying the imbalance of public institutions which are predominantly Bumiputras. Obviously to them, two wrongs would make it right.

Diversifying the student body and faculty is a worthy goal in itself; it is not a sop to Malays. How can these institutions, private or public, prepare their students for an increasingly diverse global marketplace when the learning environment is so insular and limited? You would think that with the predominant Bumiputra population, private institutions would strive to cater to this market niche and at the same time expose their students to the predominant culture.

This racial segregation is worse because it is voluntary. There is no attempt at remedying the situation. Educators in both private and public sectors are content with the status quo. This segregation does not serve our students; it is also inimical to the healthy development of our plural nation.

Our private colleges are satisfied merely in being followers. While it is good for them to have affiliations like twinning and transfer programmes with foreign universities, Malaysian institutions must carve their own tradition and path. At present most are content with being 'feeder schools' to foreign institutions.

What we need is the development of indigenous private schools and universities that would meet the unique demands of our nation. We can achieve this by adopting the right policies and with appropriate governmental support. In the next three essays I will explore how this could be achieved.

M BAKRI MUSA writes frequently on issues affecting his native land, Malaysia. His day job is as a surgeon in private practice in Silicon Valley, California. He and his wife Karen live on a ranch in Morgan Hill. He can be reached at bakrimusa@juno.com

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