

Private sector has role to play in education (Pt 4)

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In formulating a policy that would envisage a greater role for the private sector, it is worthwhile to review the experiences elsewhere.

In America, everyone is entitled to free publicly-funded education from K-12 years. In fact schooling for this age group is compulsory. While the government is not directly involved in preschool there are many publicly-funded programmes targeted for children of disadvantaged families.

Preschoolers excepted, most (over 85 percent) American children attend public schools where not only is the tuition free but so too the textbooks and transportation. There are also no examination fees. Contrast that to Malaysia where while the tuition is free, there are considerable added burdens for the cost of books, uniforms, non-tuition fees and transportation.

There is no public subsidy of private schools in America, as in many countries. Consequently these schools are only for the wealthy. However, many of these schools recognise their social responsibility and provide generous scholarships to promising students from poor families. That is also a smart way to widen their talent pool as well as provide diversity to their student body.

To the north in Quebec, Canada, the state subsidises private schools that meet its standards and prescription. Such subsidies reduce the tuition by as much as 30 percent. It is also an effective way for the state to exert influence over these private schools. It is not surprising that Quebec has a high percentage of its students attending private schools (17, as compared to 10 in America).

Chile has a novel system of vouchers. With a voucher a student is free to attend any school, public or private, with the school collecting its revenue through the vouchers of the students it enrolls. The salient point is that judgment on a school's quality (and the decision to enroll) rests entirely with the consumer: the student.

Unlike in Quebec, the government exerts no control over these schools. It is sufficiently enlightened to recognise that the best judge of a school's quality is not some central authority but its pupils and their parents. The market will take care of the mediocre schools.

Same rigidity, mindless memorization

Central to this assumption is that the performances of these schools must be widely distributed so parents could make an informed decision.

Thailand has another approach towards private – specifically international – schools. Its leaders recognise that the national curriculum is hopelessly out-of-date but the teachers and administrators are incapable culturally, intellectually and politically of changing it as they have been brought up under the system.

Thus Thailand approaches the problem from a different angle. It opens up the system to international schools with their own sets of curriculum free from controls of the ministry of education (MOE). The government still exerts controls but only in areas other than the curriculum. For example, these schools must meet certain physical requirements and be headed by a Thai national.

These schools must also be accredited by a recognised international body. That is smart as there is no way for those bureaucrats in the Thai MOE to competently evaluate these schools.

There are currently nearly 100 such schools in Thailand, not a large number but enough for a critical mass. These schools are not yet within the reach of the middle class, as in Quebec. However, as these students end up at leading universities abroad and as they are also the children of the elite, they are destined to be influential.

They would be capable later of effecting fundamental and transformational changes as they had not been brought up and trapped by the rigidity and stultifying culture of the current national system. The Thai experiment is certainly worth watching.

A slightly different model is South Korea. There are private schools there but except for their being free of government funding, there is not much difference between them and public schools. The same rigidity, mindless memorisation, and strict blind obedience to authority exist as in public schools.

Cannot escape cultural trap

To escape that cultural stricture, South Korea allowed many private international (primarily American) schools with their independent curriculum and medium of instruction, as with Thailand. Two such schools, Daewon (established in 1983) and Minjok (1993) deserve special mention.

Both use English exclusively and are designed to prepare the best Korean students for global leadership. At Minjok, the emphasis is on 'Teaching-Discussion-Writing', away from the usual memorisation and regurgitation that masquerade as education in Asian schools.

The remarkable feat of these two schools is that their short history notwithstanding, they are now the biggest feeder schools for elite American universities. This being Korea however, the two schools still cannot escape their cultural trap. As one former Daewon teacher commented, one of her students committed suicide on the day her SAT score was released.

Today there are private universities even in the most socialist of countries, with Russia now boasting more than 200. For the most successful model however, you cannot beat the American system of private colleges. If you take anybody's list of the top 25 American universities, the vast majority would be private. Looked at another way, private American universities dominate anybody's list of top global universities. That is reason enough for Malaysia to look closely at the American model.

First however, I need to clarify the terminology. Those private American universities like Harvard are not 'private' in the same sense as IBM or Microsoft Corporation. Meaning, they are private but not profit-making; they do not have shareholders eagerly anticipating dividends. Instead they are non-profit entities, akin tax-wise to non-governmental groups (NGOs). As such they enjoy considerable tax and other advantages. These universities are entitled to research grants from governmental agencies and their students are eligible for government grants, loans and scholarships, just like students at public universities.

In return for those privileges, these universities have to abide by certain rules, like subscribing to federal affirmative action rules and non-discriminatory practices in admissions and hiring. It is this unique public-private partnership that makes American 'private' universities shine.

There are 'real' private (meaning, profit-making and proprietary) universities; DeVry and the University of Phoenix being two of the largest. However, they never appear on anybody's list of top universities. Their student body too is entirely different, made up mainly of working adults rather than those coming straight out of high school. They also do not have the traditional campus of a 'regular' university.

Private universities in other countries are more like America's DeVry than its Harvard. In Malaysia's pursuit for private universities, the American non-profit institutions like Harvard should be the model, not the proprietary ones. Unfortunately most private universities in Malaysia are of the DeVry variety. They have their place and help fill a void, but they would never lead the nation to greatness.

Many countries are importing wholesale this American model by inviting them to set up branch campuses. By far the most successful (by this I mean the most number of campuses) have been the Middle Eastern countries, undoubtedly facilitated by their oil wealth.

Concept of liberal education

There are definite limitations to this wholesale importation. Even if I were to transplant en bloc the Stanford campus in Dubai, the university will never be the Stanford of Palo Alto. Try bringing a speaker critical of the government to speak on campus at one of the branches of the American universities in Dubai! Those countries that are enthusiastically transplanting Western campuses to their home soil forget one salient element. That is, what contributes to the greatness of Stanford include the general social, economic and political environment of California specifically and America generally.

This wholesale importation is not a recent phenomenon. Early in the last century, Western philanthropists set up the Peking Union Medical College. It quickly achieved its goal of being the Johns Hopkins of China. However, with the Cultural Revolution, all that painstaking gains were destroyed. That institution has since regained its original premier status with the return of sanity in China.

Another successful experiment, also led by Western philanthropists, is the American University in Beirut, established in 1866 at the height of Western imperialism in the region. With its Western curriculum and teaching style, it quickly eclipsed such venerable institutions as the centuries-old Al Azhar. Today with the turmoil in the region, the lustre is off that institution, but for a long time it remained the jewel in the crown of the Arab intellectual world.

Malaysia too has dabbled in its own version of American importation but with little success: the Malaysian University of Science and Technology (Must) set up in collaboration with Boston's MIT. It would take more than just grafting the name of a prestigious American university to make your campus respectable.

A more enduring endeavor would be to adopt the concept of a western liberal education, and with the help of proven scholars and educators, establish your own institutions. The Aga Khan did this, setting up campuses first in Pakistan and then in other Muslim countries. Its success can be gauged by the fact that its medical school, established in Karachi only in 1983, has today an international reputation far exceeding other long established universities in that country.

What the Aga Khan proves is that what is important is not the building of fancy Western buildings or the pasting of a prestigious name that would make your institution great, rather

the adoption of the concept of liberal education, academic freedom, and the pursuit of knowledge.

This is what our policymakers must keep central as they examine the various models and envisage a greater role for the private sector.

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