

Private sector has role to play in education (Pt 6)

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Private colleges and universities

As with schools, opportunities for private sector participation at the post-secondary level are also endless.

At one end would be the completely independent proprietary universities free of governmental control except those that govern any private enterprise. At the other would be the various public-private partnerships.

The advantage of being independent is just that. As Thomas Kealey, head of the only independent private university in Britain, the University of Buckingham, observed, "Every other university ... works solely to government targets.

The government gives them money, and therefore they do whatever the government wants. [O]ur economic success is determined by our students' satisfaction. The other universities' success is determined by how much they please the government."

Kealey's assertion reveals something else, and that is the basic philosophy of any commercial enterprise: Give your customers (in this case, students) what they want, not what they need.

It is not my purpose to challenge the legitimacy of such a viewpoint, or support the traditional view of the university as a community of teachers and scholars concerned only with the pursuit of knowledge and truth. In reality, we need both types of institutions.

Just because a college is private and free from governmental funding does not mean that the government can abrogate its responsibilities to regulate these institutions. They too must be regulated, like other private providers of services like hospitals and restaurants.

The purpose of regulatory oversight is to prevent and weed out fraudulent operators and institutions; that is, to protect the public and the industry.



Our students must be assured that when they enroll in a private college and part with their parent's hard-earned cash to pay for the tuition, they are indeed getting an education and not be the victim of a degree mill.

Of course there is no way any regulator could prevent a shady character with money and eager to burnish his qualification from getting a fake degree from one of the many fraudulent purveyors.

Shady operators and degree mills

Such regulations would also protect the industry. If it were to be infested with shady



operators and degree mills, then the industry as a whole would suffer. The value and marketability of the genuine providers would decline. This applies to providers of education as well as purveyors of Gucci leather goods.

This oversight function gets complicated in these days of "non-traditional" learning. The line between a degree mill and legitimate "non-traditional" on-line degree program can be blurry.

A "dissertation" can be nothing more than a few pages of your "life experiences," and heavily coached at that, or even ghost written. That these fraudulent operators are becoming more sophisticated is reason to remain vigilant.

One way to achieve this would be to have strict definitions of terms and clear criteria to qualify.

Just as private doctors and lawyers must have certain qualifications and experience before they hang out their shingle, so too private colleges and universities must meet certain published and transparent standards.

Thus before any institution could grant a degree or diploma, it must satisfy certain academic and non-academic criteria.

The former would include the qualifications of its key faculty and academic leaders, entry requirements, and quality of courses. The non-academic criteria relate to the facilities, financial soundness, and the posting of a performance bonds.

As for the quality of the academic offerings, these institutions would have to acquire accreditation from recognized foreign bodies. Alternatively they could seek accreditation from *Lembaga Akreditasi Negara* (LAN).

Unfortunately LAN is not an independent agency; it is just another government bureaucracy.

Further, it accredits only private institutions, not public ones. We need an independent agency staffed not by civil servants but relevant professionals from both the public and private sectors. That is the only way to enhance LAN's credibility.

Once the regulatory requirements are met, any entity, foreign or local, should be able to set up a private college using whatever language of instruction it chooses.

Private, non-profit post-secondary institutions

As indicated earlier, there is no model of a successful truly private or proprietary university anywhere in the world. Hence I suggest we adopt the American model of private but non-profit universities.

Like America, we should grant our private non-profit universities tax-free status; free from paying income, property and other taxes. Additionally, donations to these institutions should be tax deductible.

The government should also treat the students attending these private institutions no differently from those of public ones in terms of eligibility for scholarships and student



loans.

Likewise, the government should not discriminate the granting of research funds between public and private universities; those should be given to those most competent to conduct the study.

These universities should also have access to government-guaranteed loans so they could lower their funding costs for capital projects.

Additionally the government should give direct financial grants to these non-profit universities. After all it has done that to foreign universities, like Ohio University (US), the Royal College of Surgeons (Ireland), and Cambridge.

In return for those privileges, these universities would have to agree to some mutually agreed and beneficial goals, like having their faculty and domestic student body broadly reflect Malaysian society.

No rigid quota

However, there would not be any rigid quota. The university should recognise that diversity in the classroom enhances the learning experience. It would also be a wonderful and effective way of preparing your students for the diverse global marketplace.

In short, these non-profit private universities would be like my proposed charter schools.



to technical and vocational institutes. I envisage a companies banding together to set up a vocational institute to and carpenters.

major hotel operators establishing a school training chefs, tour

bridges between private and public institutions so students the system to the other at many levels with minimal loss of particularly useful during this time of economic crisis when many shifted and they can no longer afford private universities.

would not put these universities and institutions under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) as that would impose significant conflict of interest.

Those folks at MOHE see themselves first and foremost as looking after the interests of public universities. They would see these private universities as unwelcome challenges to the growth of public universities.

Instead these private tertiary educational institutions should be under the Ministry Of Trade and Industry (MITI)!

After all the initial idea of having them was essentially economic – to save and earn foreign exchange – the same mission of the ministry. Besides, there is precedent for this, with the International Islamic University under MITI.

That was a sneaky maneuver to overcome the government's prohibition on the use of

English in public universities. By having IIU under MITI, the university is considered under the law as a commercial enterprise rather than an educational institution, and hence could use English without incurring the wrath of the language nationalists.

Brilliant!

Apart from establishing these non-profit universities, there are other avenues for public-private partnership involving our public universities.

On many American campuses, the food, housing, and many other non-academic services are run not by the university but by private entities, relieving the university of the financial, human, and other strains of running such ancillary services.

Another would be for public universities to employ practitioners from the private sector as adjunct faculty members. That would not only supplement the teaching staff but also bring a much needed practical perspective to the curriculum.



Like everything else, such private-public partnerships can go too far as to undermine the universities core academic mission.

A major concern on American academia today is to what extent these collaborations with private for-profit entities would compromise the intellectual and academic integrity of the research and the institution.

In many instances especially in medical research, the findings are often tainted because key investigators are too generously funded by interested commercial parties.

Such conflicts are experienced even on such hallowed campuses as Harvard. Recognition of the problem is the first step towards solving or even preventing it.

Loosening the stranglehold

The Malaysian government tried to loosen its stranglehold on our public universities through the exercise of "corporatisation" in the hope of freeing them from the tight leash of ministry bureaucrats.

The result? Nothing much has changed despite the costs, flurry of paperwork, and legal maneuverings. The reason is that the same people with the same mentality remain in charge, only their titles are changed.

Take one example. A few years ago the newly corporatised University of Malaya went into partnership with a private entity to develop part of the campus.

Unfortunately it was not to build a new laboratory, convention center, or student residence, but an exclusive gated community!

Not even under the most generous interpretation would such an arrangement be viewed as advancing the university's mission. The units were so luxurious that they were beyond the reach of the faculty members!

My criticism is not directed at corporatisation, rather how it was done, again illustrating my

earlier point about a sound policy having flawed implementation. My proposals as outlined here would entail first of all a change in mindset of those in charge.

A vigorous private sector involvement in higher education would lead to greater competition for our public universities. That could lead to their improvement.

The recent decision by many public universities to improve the English proficiency of their students is directly the consequence of the competition from private universities. Employers (other than the government) are preferring graduates of private institutions over those from public ones. Consequently public universities have to respond to this challenge.

Such is the consequence of competition. That alone is a good enough reason for the government to engage the private sector.

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