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Unis must find ways to cope with cuts

THERE have been changes in confronting the management, administration, and overall organisation of the Malaysian Higher Education.

From only six universities in 1985, the country now has 20.

In 2012, five research universities Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) were given autonomy by the Higher Education Ministry to act with full accountability on academic and administrative matters.

Concerns continue to be voiced about the lack of local universities in the top 100 rankings. The rankings serve as an indicator for quality.

In fact, according to the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) set for public university lecturers, the focus is mainly on research output.

A varsity is also gauged by research output, productivity, international peer-reviewed publications and citations received.

International recognition of faculty as seen in invitational leadership positions and mem-

bership in professional organisations, participation in select conferences and receipt of achievement awards, are among the other factors.

One of the key sectors in government to face budget cuts last October was higher education.

Tertiary institutions had their budget slashed from RM15.78bil last year to RM13.37bil, this year.

Under the circumstances, some universities are letting go of foreign lecturers, cutting down on faculty operational costs such as stationery, air conditioning and travel.

These measures will not make up for the budget shortfalls and could seriously hamper the ability of the public universities to improve standards.

The decision for the budget cuts over a short time, does have an impact.

It affects both staff and student morale and does not fully attain the goals of the ministry's "Soaring Upwards" motto.

It's time to re-organise and change the way Malaysian public universities operate and cope with the budget cutbacks.

Higher education institutions have to be more efficient in the implementation of the pro-

grammes they offer.

One way is to seek research collaboration with industry. Examples are the recent tie-up between UUM-CIMB and UMK-MAYBANK.

Partnerships between varsities and industry can only be commercialised with new innovation knowledge and through technological findings.

They can also run more management programmes for industry and significantly increase the number of foreign student enrolments.

Offering courses that are in demand such as Industrial Business & Management and MBA programmes and the Nurse Practitioner studies, will expand the target market group from school leavers to working adults.

Another strategy is to admit more international students who are willing to pay higher international fees. We should start by attracting students from China, the Middle East, Africa and eastern Europe.

Universities could initiate more twinning programmes to attract international students. They could also offer them stipends or even set up branch campuses abroad.

Local varsities should market its own programmes internationally while maximising net revenues. They also need to work on developing attractive business models to engage potential donors and investors.

Furthermore, the Higher Education Ministry should also reward and provide recognition to academicians who strive hard to upgrade the quality of education through internal collaborations within faculties, and external partnerships with some of the top foreign universities.

Without improvement and significant inroads to the ways in which Malaysian public universities are moving forward, it will be a challenging task for the country to deliver quality and highly reputable education. At the same time, it will be difficult to sustain growth especially with uncertainties in the global economy.

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