Challenges of internationalising education

In the Higher Education Strategic Plan, intensifying internationalisation has been identified as one of the seven thrust areas. There are many facets to internationalising education. One of them is having foreign students from diverse countries. At the moment, Malaysia is doing quite well in this aspect as we have almost 70,000 foreign students, which indicates we are making good progress in our strategic plans.

However, most of the foreign students coming here to study are pursuing foundation and diploma courses. So, the challenge for us now is to find a way to attract more foreign students who can enhance the quality of higher education in the country by participating in postgraduate programmes.

In 2008, there were more than 900,000 students in the country pursuing higher education. Out of over 400,000 students studying in Malaysian public universities, more than 18,000 were foreign students. Most of these students come from developing countries. We should be trying to reverse this trend by getting students from the developed countries to study in the developing world.

Internationalisation is also reflected in the number of international academics in our universities. Business professors in Australia, for example, may earn AUD 120,000 (approximately RM371,000) per annum. In the UK, they may earn GBP 90,000 (approximately RM445,800) annually and in the US, they can take home about USD 150,000 (approximately RM470,100) a year. The question now is: can we offer them a competitive enough package to attract them to work at our higher education institutions?

Of course when we talk about internationalisation, we also have to consider the quality of our curriculum and programmes. For example, how does an MBA from a Malaysian university compare to one from a foreign university? To earn an MBA locally, you would need to complete more than 45 credit hours or 15 subjects. In Australia, the requirement for an MBA could be 10 subjects.

So, how do you equate a local master’s degree that has a 15-subject requirement and costs RM25,000, to a master’s degree that has a nine-subject requirement offered by a foreign university at RM30,000?

Internationalisation also calls for greater cooperation in R&D activities between Malaysia and other countries in the world. While our public institutions are working closely with each other and with research centres from around the world, including in Europe and the US, these kinds of collaborations are limited to specific areas.

Additionally, while collaborations between Malaysian and foreign institutions are encouraging, not many researchers from Malaysian institutions have been awarded large international research grants. This means that we have to continue improving the capabilities of our researchers and the quality of our research so that we can be competitive at the international level.

Another facet of internationalisation that we could touch on is student mobility. Student mobility from the West to the East has actually been very encouraging. However, most of the students from Europe and the US are going to countries like China, India, Japan and Korea. There is limited mobility to this part of the world because they are less aware of what we have to offer. That is why promotion and collaborations in relation to this is very important.

Student mobility though, is not just about getting students from the West to come to our country. The bigger challenge is: how do we give our students the experience of going abroad, especially those who are not involved in twinning programmes? One of the biggest hurdles for Malaysians going abroad is affordability. How can we promote mobility when the resources of our people are very limited?

Finally, when we talk about internationalising education, it also involves creating an international brand for Malaysian higher education institutions. Branding of higher education is a function of reputation. Reputation refers to what we have offered or delivered in terms of quality. We need to find out to what extent a Malaysian brand is accepted globally. A lot of work needs to be done to further enhance the quality and reputation of our institutions so that they will be accepted as the preferred choice for higher education worldwide.

Internationalisation of education is a complex and multifaceted issue. Until we are committed to overcome some of these issues innovatively, the dream to make Malaysia a regional education hub can be a highly challenging mission.

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