An immersive Asian education

It is clear that Asian societies appreciate higher education. It is seen as a stepping stone to a better life for the younger generation and a way for the Asian communities as a whole to get out of the socio-economic doldrums of low income and low purchasing power that many third world and developing countries face. A better education, for Asian societies, translates into the ability to command better wages, and thus improve the standard of life for the family in the long-term.

For that reason — a natural enough instinct to preserve the future — Asian families are willing to sacrifice their current lifestyle in order to give their kids a better education, and eventually have a better life than their parents. Children are then expected to care for their parents in return for their elders’ sacrifices.

Yet as time goes on, we see that this value system of give and take is slowly being distorted by the rapid changes in the socio-economic and geopolitical landscape. There are now parents who cannot afford to be independent, yet are not supported by the children they helped educate, and many are abandoned or stowed away in old folks’ homes. These changes in the outlook of social responsibilities should be taken seriously in the sense of how we can continue to instil and support the traditional values Asian societies have upheld in the past.

One of the challenges faced by higher education providers in Asia is how to reconcile the traditional values with the existing socio-economic environment that is much more self-centred. We want to work on avoiding the trap of becoming a highly individualised community — where the focus is on me, me, me. Education is one of the platforms that can help us to halt the degeneration of the values that make us proud to be Asian.

It is this uniquely Asian society, values and culture that also works to attract investors from overseas — including those in the form of students. Higher education in Asia is appealing thanks to the diversity that we have to offer. Take any Asian country, and you can find layers of complexity once you dig a little deeper.

Take India for example. At first glance, most people assume that it is a homogeneous society, but in fact it is incredibly diverse, with more than 2,000 ethnic groups. Closer to home, we see how Malaysia itself offers a unique form of exotic complexity with its potpourri of diversity. I believe that this is our strategic advantage — that we are able to position ourselves as a truly cross-cultural experience for those who choose to visit us.

UNIRAZAK, for instance, has hosted students from France. Previously they came only for one semester, but recently there have been students enrolling for a year. Our marketing position as an immersive multicultural educational experience is one that can easily capture a large section of the student market if worked correctly.

The Asian economy is swiftly becoming one of the more dominant in the market, as Europe and the US struggle with sluggish recovery and instability. This makes seeking higher education in Asia attractive from both an economic and experiential point of view. The fact is that there is no denying that there is a bright future for education in Asia; we just need people to realise that the flavour of higher education is destined to be spicy.

Professor Datuk Dr Zabid

Dr Md Zabid Abdul Rashid

is the president and vice chancellor of Universiti Tun Abdul Razak

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