New beginnings?

With a moratorium on new private colleges as well as new reviews and audits, the Higher Education Ministry is set to have a busy year of reflecting on past policy decisions.

BY PRIYA KULASAGARAN

The local higher education scene may see some major restructuring this year, on a planning level at least.

In his New Year's address last Tuesday, Higher Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin announced several steps that are set to benefit the end consumers - students.

The biggest shake-up for the private sector was the two-year moratorium on new private tertiary providers from Feb 1.

The moratorium excludes institutions whose applications are currently being processed, existing institutions who wish to upgrade their status, and highly reputable foreign branch campuses.

Mohamed Khaled said a major reason for the moratorium was to address the excess of private institutions compared to local and international demand.

"Even though tertiary enrolment is still high, there are signs indicating that institutions are producing more graduates than what the market needs," he said in his speech.

Mohamed Khaled later told reporters that the moratorium will also address the issue of under-enrolled institutions, some of which had less than 500 students.

There are currently 37 private universities, 20 university-colleges, seven foreign branch campuses, and 414 private colleges in the country.

The ministry imposed similar moratoriums before, such as the freeze on private nursing colleges and diploma programmes in 2010, followed by a five-year moratorium on new medical courses in 2011.

Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities president Datuk Dr Parmjit Singh welcomed the moratorium, saying that it was long overdue.

"Based on the data I have compiled from official sources, students numbers at private institutions have been declining," he said.

"In 2010 for example, total student enrolment in the private sector was at 542,000 - by 2011, this reduced to 452,000.

"By contrast, students enrolled in public institutions for those years were 463,000 and 508,000 respectively.

"We are also seeing a decrease in new international students at private institutions." Dr Parmjit said that among the complaints made by some international students were complicated immigration procedures as well as concern for their safety.

Universiti Tun Abdul Razak president and vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Md Zabid Abdul Rashid pointed out that local demand for postgraduate degrees was still lukewarm as local employers have yet to recognise the value of such qualifications.

Commenting on under-enrolled colleges, Prof Md Zabid said that this may boil down to operators' motives behind setting up their institutions.

"There may be some operators who have very limited knowledge about the higher education business... If you don't understand the critical success factors, it can be a painful industry to work in.

"The results take at least three to four years; by then it can be very costly to some businessmen or investors," he said.

The other major announcements for the private sector were a new yearly audit for 10 selected private universities and university-colleges and a review of the Private Higher Education Act 1996.

According to Mohamed Khaled, institutions for audit will be selected based on complaints received from the public or at random.

The review will be carried out by a committee headed by Taylor's University vice-chancellor and president Prof Datuk Dr Hassan Said.

Prof Hassam, who was the first Higher Education Department director-general, explained that the review period will be from February till end of the year.

"The committee has not been appointed yet, but we will make sure that all the relevant stakeholders are represented including professional associations and agencies that support higher education; I would like public consultation as well, because the views of parents and students are equally important," he said.

Funding, life-long learning, and research

Another important review on the cards is that of the higher education financing system, including the sustainability of the Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN).

"There is a clear misunderstanding (among the public) when the issue of higher education financing is seen solely from the angle of the PTPTN and student payments.

"The base issue is how public tertiary institutions manage Government investment and funding effectively and produce results that meet the country's needs," said Mohamed Khaled.

He further stressed the importance of life-long learning and announced initiatives to support continuous education.
First up is the Malaysian Qualifying Agency’s (MQA) Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), which formally accredits prior work experience for entry to post-secondary qualifications.

The first APEL applications for certificate and diploma programmes started on Feb 1. Meanwhile, community colleges have now lowered their entry requirements to just one SPM credit.

"Previously only the Selayang Community College offered the Special Skills Certificate (targeted at those with disabilities) in hospitality services; for 2013, five more community colleges will offer this certification in other fields such as information technology, photography, fashion and clothing, food processing, and pastry skills," added Mohamed Khaled.

Community college students from families earning less than RM3,000 a month can further receive a monthly allowance of RM300 as aid from the PTPTN; others may also apply for this allowance in the form of a loan.

In research and development, the largest allocation announced was the RM80mil slotted for the Central Lab Management programme, which aims to increase collaboration between university research labs and industry in niche fields such as nanotechnology, biotechnology and the automotive industry.

An additional RM10mil will be channelled to a trust fund for comprehensive universities to develop further in their respective fields of focus.

Elaborating on the need for innovation in education, Mohamed Khaled added that the ministry had set up the "T-Novation" fund to spark more research in the field of teaching and learning.

"Since its launch last October, 90 research proposals have been received, and once all the processes are complete the final T-Novation products will be developed by the end of this year," he said.

Aside from monetary benefits, the ministry has two new projects to support research work; the MyGrants online portal to manage research grants, and the Idea Interchange and Connection Bank which will act as a centre to register universities’ intellectual property.

Mohamed Khaled also announced three new areas for the ministry’s Industry Centre of Excellence (ICoE) programme – biotechnology, construction, and ICT.

The ICoE involves universities and companies jointly training human resource, from school leavers to degree holders, for specialised fields.

“We believe that through this programme, the development of more competent human resource in line with industry and state needs can be carried out in a more structured and organised manner,” he said.
Mohamed Khaled launching the MyGrants portal, after delivering his New Year's address to ministry staff. Looking on are (from left) Higher Education secretary general Datuk Ab Rahim Md Noor, deputy ministers Datuk Dr Hou Kok Chung and Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah.