The price of excellence in education

TWO weeks ago, I attended a seminar on building excellent infrastructures for institutions of higher learning. It was certainly a very interesting session where emerging economies presented their future infrastructure plans, which ranged from hundreds of millions to billions of ringgit. The University of Hong Kong plans to spend around RM3 billion (RM2.3 billion) to meet the needs of their future expansion plans. A few hundred million has been allocated for another university in Vietnam, and a new campus for the University of Macau will cost a few hundred million in US dollars. These tell us the real costs of excellence in education today.

To ensure Singapore will remain competitive and sustain its edge in the near future, the National University of Singapore (NUS) has established a collaboration with Yale University to offer a liberal arts undergraduate programme at the Yale-NUS College, which is based in Singapore. The interesting part is how to make Yale-NUS College similar to the Yale University in New Haven, considering the climatic conditions and culture are much different. That was the challenge the Yale-NUS team had to prepare for before building their new campus, which will be ready in 2013.

Are we ready for such a project in Malaysia? Do we have the will power to have one like our neighbours? Well, many reasons may explain why we are still undecided.

First of all, I think it is because we lack a clear vision of what we mean by excellence in a world-class institution. We may talk about excellence or being number one in the world, but we do not know what it really means. We aspire to become like universities in the West such as Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge and MIT. In some countries, they do not talk much about it; instead, they bring the world class to their own backyard. We need to have this passion for excellence in our blood, and strive towards the greater good of knowledge for the progress of mankind.

The other problem is we do not have champions. For example, we need someone identified by the government to champion excellence in education in Malaysia. We have yet to hear of academics championing towards becoming the best business school, best engineering school, or the best design school and so on. We never look at how our endowed resources are giving us a strategic advantage. More importantly, we don’t seem to remember that resource allocations are limited and must be used well for the future.

There is also a lack of coordination and commitment when it comes to realising our visions. Let’s take Putrajaya as an example. Tun Dr Mahathir was committed to making his vision of an administrative capital for the nation a reality. He made sure that he was frequently briefed on the progress of Putrajaya. Despite that, we still see hiccups like the lack of parking spaces in Putrajaya. When Mahathir envisioned Putrajaya, he imagined that public transportation woes will be resolved by the time the city was ready, but it never was.

This shows lack of coordination, which is what happens when a leader has a plan but unfortunately, others do not buy into it. They do not have the passion to work with the leader to make it happen. Putrajaya is not a symbol of Mahathir. It is a Malaysian symbol but other people cannot see this.

Another problem we face is lack of commitment towards ensuring we have the appropriate resources and this is largely because we fail to appreciate the value of intangibles. For example, we cannot see the value of investing in people and because of that, we fail behind. Are local institutions willing to invest RM3 million to bring in a top-notch professor from abroad who can help improve the quality of higher education locally? The answer is likely no, because for us the RM3 million that we can see as cash is worth more than its intangible value as an investment that could bring in billions in returns. Some cynics may say, rather than paying these experts, why don’t you pay me (locals)?

When we didn’t know how to produce a car, we sought assistance from Mitsubishi. Working with Mitsubishi costs us a lot but people did not complain because they can see the car. However, investing RM3 million for a good academic who can help boost our education standards is not something our people can easily appreciate.

One of the reasons some countries manage to stay ahead of us is because they are able to efficiently review and amend their laws, rules and regulations to suit the needs of the contemporary environment. I was told that somebody who constructed a green building in Malaysia is having difficulty getting the local municipality to approve this building as local laws have not been revised to accommodate environmentally-friendly structures. How can we move forward if we are still being bogged down by archaic rules and regulations?

In 1996, Kuala Lumpur only had 5 per cent of green space, compared to Singapore which had 17.8 per cent of green space in 1997. We live in a concrete jungle and we are not environmentally conscious. When we were developing this city, we did not look at the big picture. Many things were done in an ad-hoc manner without a masterplan because we wanted to have progress quickly, at least not until the Greater Kuala Lumpur Masterplan was made known recently.

This is not about assigning blame. Instead, we should be willing to review our mistakes so we can plan ahead and realise our vision for the future. If we truly want to achieve excellence in education, it comes with a price. I am not just talking in monetary terms though that is certainly part of it. What we really need to do is be willing to make sacrifices, think things through and scrutinise our plans carefully before we implement them.

We certainly need to have a vision but it must also come with the passion and a champion to make it happen. And we must have faith in our champions and be committed to helping him/her see things through. If the vision is to significantly improve the standard of higher education in this country, then it is our collective responsibility to make it a reality. The price of excellence is rising sharply, and if we do not catch up now, it may be too late. William Arthur Ward once said ‘the price of excellence is discipline, the cost of mediocrity is disappointment’. So, let’s commit to excellence and achieve our Malaysian dream to make Vision 2020 a reality.
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