Inti out of Sarawak

College's withdrawal indicates state's inability to attract the smartest and brightest

The frontrunner to snap up Inti College Sarawak's vacant-by-year-end campus in Kuching is UCSI University. My good source has instructed me not to reveal names, nonetheless, the insider confirmed UCSI has entered advanced negotiations with Inti.

Another senior UCSI Sarawak official, who similarly declined to be named, when asked on the matter, did not deny there were negotiations.

However, I'm not sure how I feel about the development, since UCSI had initially planned to build its own hotel and campus at the Kuching Isthmus, just adjacent to the convention centre. Its present campus near Kuching International Airport is leased.

Here's some more background before we move on; UCSI had planned a multi-storey hotel and a full-fledged campus at the Isthmus. Plans were unveiled in 2011 to much fanfare with promises of the facility being ready by this year. Since the announcement, however, there's been no sign of construction.

My source told me that the deal to build at the Isthmus is now totally off. The deal breaker was land price. In the period since the announcement, the price of land at the Isthmus has increased. Negotiations never went past this stage.

In the meantime, Inti College Sarawak was faltering. It was hard hit by the opening of Swinburne University's Sarawak Campus about a decade ago. Swinburne here has about 4,000 students, while Inti has less than 1,000.

Inti's pullout from Sarawak set tongues wagging. Second Finance Minister Datuk Seri Wong Soon Koh recently said he was taken aback by the news.

"It shows just how competitive the private sector higher education industry is nowadays," Wong said, adding Swinburne was on better footing since it was backed by the state Government.

Inti entered Sarawak in 1991 as one of a few private sector colleges to offer twinning programmes with reputable international universities. Back then, Welfare, Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Fatimah Abdullah was at the beginning of her teaching career.

"I watched with interest the development of Inti College Sarawak," Fatimah said to me over the weekend. "I was a senior assistant at its (college's) neighbouring school. I was in awe when its majestic frontage and new building was coming up."

I asked the minister for her thoughts on Inti's closure and UCSI's possible takeover of the campus.

She declined to speculate, but said: "Until today I still like the campus' architecture. If UCSI takes over, good for UCSI. It is a good institute of higher learning, which I have great respect for, for providing quality education."

I am less upbeat. The crux of the matter is that there is now one less institute of higher learning in Kuching, and one less new campus to be built.

You could easily draw comparisons between Inti's withdrawal to the shutting down of Sanmina-SCI's plant here, which left more than 800 jobless overnight.

In an article little over a month ago, I wrote that, while it was fine for people to be angry at the US-based company's sudden closure, we, as Sarawakians, must also admit our own failings.

Sanmina-SCI was not the first technology company to leave Sarawak - so did Komag Inc and Western Digital in the preceding decade.

"No country is ready for high-tech industries until after it has a large pool of scientists, researchers, engineers, technicians and let's not forget, management expertise to back everything up," Dewan Rakyat Deputy Speaker Datuk Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar said in an interview last December.

Those words could be applied to the pullout of Inti from Sarawak.

Those in the academic world know that Johor is the bright spot for higher education in Malaysia. Its Iskandar Malaysia masterplan includes — to date — five new campuses of international universities. Some of the most prestigious, like the Management Development Institute of Singapore and Yale-National...
University of Singapore College, will no doubt attract away students who might have come to Sarawak.

Some may argue that higher education is not a zero-sum game, and that Sarawak's underdevelopment could also be seen as potential for growth.

That argument is perfectly reasonable: A completely new, built-from-the-ground-up, University is taking shape in Sibu, and another branch of UITM under construction in Mukah.

But the harsh truth, which should surprise nobody, is that the phased withdrawal of Inti is an indication of our inability to attract the best and brightest.

Inti was not the first private sector higher education body to shut down operations in this state. (Anyone recall Institut Systematic?)

More importantly, could more colleges and universities close or withdraw?