Paradigm shift in higher learning

RECENTLY attended a panel discussion on the university of the future, organised by the Higher Education Ministry as a maiden initiative of its knowledge-sharing programme. Many came from public and private universities in the country. The panelists included some well-known personalities: a former deputy governor of Bank Negara, former vice-chancellor of Universiti Utara Malaysia and a former chief executive officer of Proton. The panellists touched on a number of interesting predictions on what future universities will look like.

One member posed these questions: As we move into the future, who are our students? Who should we educate? How do we address rising interconnection among disciplines? And how does one reach to a global market?

Many already bought on the concept of life-long learning. How will it shape the future structure of universities? We have already witnessed the change in the way higher education is delivered. Many are familiar with MOOCs, which stands for Massive Open Online Courses. A few top American universities have started offering such courses online. And they are free. Whatever it is, the panelists agreed on the fact that competition in the future will be decided by who has the brains. Knowledge is the key currency of creativity and innovation.

UCSI University recently hosted a two-day inaugural seminar on entrepreneurship. Titled "Student Entrepreneurial Experience", it attracted good participation from students and budding entrepreneurs. The keynote address by the founder of the university, Datuk Peter Ng, left a deep impression on the audience. He spoke as a true entrepreneur, building UCSI University to be what it is today from a starting investment of a mere RM2,000!

On risks, "It is not just about being risk averse but more about being risk aware". Universities now live in exciting times. There is a need for a paradigm shift in higher education. There is no denying that the role of universities in the modern era is changing fast.

Future universities will not just be places of education and research but also as economic players.

The endgame in the past was to achieve employability. But going into the future, universities should now be part of the regular economic conversation. And that is beyond the ranking that have pre-occupied much of the university conversations lately.

That is important because taking the cues from very successful entrepreneurs, but not quite successful students, such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, there have been calls to "avoid universities altogether". But Jobs and Gates are an exception, even among their entrepreneurial peers. What is more telling is the 2015 Sage survey of new American companies, which reported that 99 per cent of founders hold at least a bachelor's degree.

It is encouraging that the new blueprint for higher education embraces much of these thoughts. It pushes the universities to work for not just graduate employability, but also graduate ability to create employment and beckons the universities to align closer with industries. There is now consensus on the view that future universities will not just be places of education and research, but also as economic players.

DR AHMAD IBRAHIM,
Academy of Sciences Malaysia