

# Higher education must be equitable

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Graduates at Universiti Malaya's convocation in November 2023. University graduates are vital to the country's talent pool. FILE PIC

**LETTERS:** The higher education blueprint will end next year. There is now talk of a successor blueprint. It is, therefore, disconcerting to know that students' interest in higher education is on a downward trend.

People are aware of a worrying trend of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) school-leavers uninterested in pursuing higher education.

One study by the UCSI University Poll Research Centre found only 51 per cent out of 1,000 SPM school-leavers aged 18 to 20 planned to continue studying, 39 per cent would look for a job and 10 per cent had no plans.

The disillusionment with higher education should concern us all because of the potential negative consequences on the nation's critical talent pool.

Private universities have reported a decline in enrolment. Public universities have yet to feel the drop since the the cost of enrolment is much lower because of government subsidy.

The true measure of higher education interest is reflected in the enrolment at private universities. There, students are not subsidised.

The latest we hear is that all disciplines of engineering are not attracting enough enrolment.

We know the disillusionment with higher education involves complex and multifaceted issues, and understanding the causes is important to addressing them.

Rising costs and student debts are major causes. Student debt burdens graduates for years.

Some have suggested exploring alternative funding models, including increasing access to scholarships and grants, and promoting income-driven repayment plans for student loans.

Graduates also find their degrees do not directly lead to job opportunities in their chosen fields.

We need to encourage experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and co-op programmes, and emphasise skills that are transferable across various fields.

There is also concern that access to higher education tends to be unequal, with barriers for low-income and marginalised communities. This is unhealthy as we pursue inclusivity in the economy. We need to implement policies to increase access and affordability.

Then there is the perceived irrelevance of curriculum, as some may not seem relevant to real-world applications, leading to disengagement among students.

The obvious answer is to regularly update curricula to reflect current knowledge and skills, and involve students and industry experts in the development process.

The pressure to succeed academically and financially can impact students' mental health and wellbeing.

Providing robust mental health services, promoting a healthy work-life balance, and creating a supportive campus environment are all useful measures.

What then are the strategies for addressing disillusionment?

Institutions should clearly communicate the costs, benefits and outcomes of different programmes.

Also encourage continuous learning and skill development through online courses, certifications, and professional development programmes.

Support alternative education pathways, such as vocational training, apprenticeships and online learning platforms.

It is important to involve students, faculty, employers, and policymakers in discussions about the future of higher education to ensure it meets the needs of all stakeholders.

There is no doubt that addressing disillusionment with higher education requires a collaborative effort to make the system more equitable, relevant and responsive to the needs of students and society.

Many agree addressing such disillusionment with higher education should be given top priority in the new higher education blueprint.

Only then can we guarantee delivering our talent development plan for the nation.

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